GRESS RENDAL IS
A RELUCTANT BRIDESMAID.

After being cursed by a strange crystal and finding out her life is tethered to the bride-to-be, Gress leaves her quiet life as a teacher to travel with her colleagues for the wedding. But when her travel group crosses paths with demons, draconic entities, and dark powers preventing them from reaching their destination, Gress must risk her life to keep the wedding on track.

CRYSTAL CURSED

FABLE BLACKMORE + KVROII

STORY
FABLE
BLACKMORE

ART
KVROII

Crystal Cursed

CRYSTAL CURSED

CRYSTAL CURSED

FABLE BLACKMORE
KVROII

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Fable Blackmore
KVROII

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CHAPTER 01

The narrow hallway echoed.

The woman in the room at the end of the corridor listened patiently to the resounding footsteps that approached her. Their owners, she knew, had to be a man and an accompanying customer, whose flighty voice shook upon asking a question or two every now and then.

"And these stones, they'll really help me with my problem?"

"Of course, Miss Clerski," the calm-voiced attendant reassured her.

The woman in the back room sorted through her healing stones and various crystals. Still, she knew she didn't know enough about Clerski's problem to be able to help yet.

If only her attendant was better at prying information out of customers. She had brought it up after one of her last customers had left, but he simply shook his head and laughed, with an exclamation of, "Prying? They're the ones with the problems! They'll give enough information if they really need your help!"

He couldn't do the talking when she wanted him to.

The small wooden door opened and the woman analyzed the customer who answered to the name Clerski. A tall one, she noted, but other than that she didn't seem to be the most striking. Her face was too fair, her eyes too lizard-like, and her smile was too much like that

of a fox. The woman supposed her 34 year-old customer could've been attractive if not for the bright red reading glasses (hung from a string of beads, at that), or maybe it was the clashing, sharp look of her white hair.

But it didn't matter, she knew, for Clerski was an odd one, and that meant a new customer.

"You are Rerell Clerski? Welcome to my small shop, and pardon any mess," the saleswoman greeted, putting on a false act of kindness to Clerski. She cleared her desk with her arm, which sent a pack of previously arranged cards, a carton of cigarettes, and a bag of loose tea leaves onto a smaller table.

Clerski took that moment to observe the trinkets and curiosities in the shop before finally resting her eyes on the neatly placed healing crystals.

"Is there anything I may help you with today?" The saleswoman asked. Her patience was wearing thin despite Clerski's stay totaling only a minute so far. "Your horoscope? A reading?"

Clerski, panicked and in a hurry, pulled a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket of her jacket. "I was talking to a friend on the payphone outside. She told me to find a crystal that can help with, how should I say this? Averting misfortune."

So, the saleswoman realized, this one was a superstitious one with a record of misfortune. *Easy.*

"Try this one. Aventurine."

The saleswoman handed Clerski a tumbled aventurine stone in the colors of the sunset.

Clerski dug through her wallet to find payment for the vendor. In her search, she pushed aside a few good luck charms that were obviously not doing their job.

"Aren't you going to ask me to cut the price down?"

"Oh, of course. Sorry." Clerski proceeded to hand the saleswoman almost the full cost of the stone. With that, she quickly escaped the cluttered room with her healing stone.

The saleswoman grinned to herself.

"I'll give her... three days."

She contorted into a new form, her true identity— a malevolent creature called Draecyon.

"What do you mean? I was here last night, Rerell. I stayed late to correct some tests and find some books. I slept in my classroom."

The scowling Ms. Rendal leaned against the school librarian's bookcase with her arms folded across her chest. Clerski, tired from the previous night, had asked her reserved colleague if she had been running a small shop during the nights, which caused Gress Rendal to quickly become unusually defensive.

"Gress, I saw you last night. You don't run a shop across town?"

Gress tossed a textbook carelessly across the shelf and continued to scowl. Yet, she dropped the glare when she glanced at Rerell Clerski's tired eyes.

"The nurse is downstairs, Rerell. If you need to go see her, I'll watch the library for you during my free class. You don't look too good."

"I'm okay. I have a new crystal to help me have better luck. I'm sure nothing will happen to me today."

Gress wasn't convinced. At all. Clerski already owned hundreds of these little nonsense charms. This one wasn't going to be any better than the others. Honestly, Gress didn't know if Clerski really believed in the trinkets or if she was just trying to get under her skin.

"Y'know what'll help you with that? Realizing that these damn things don't work. Quit wasting your money on that crap."

"Oh, of course. Sorry, Gress."

Clerski turned towards the PA system and paged the nurse.

Gress found herself worried for the young librarian. She hadn't been acting quite like herself since she walked into the teacher's Classics class that morning.

Clerski had apparently misplaced the key to the library, so after tracking down another teacher, Kyrett, and finding he didn't have a key either, she had found Gress and explained her situation. Reluctantly, Gress had stopped her class in favor of letting Clerski into the library, only to find that it had been broken into and the remaining books were scattered everywhere.

Clerski couldn't have been acting strangely because of that, though. She had glanced neurotically behind her shoulder too many times when she waited for the Classics teacher to open the library doors.

"Tell the nurse to come up to the library. I need to ask something of her while she's here." Gress tossed another stack of textbooks down, once again assuming her scowl.

"Something wrong?" Clerski asked.

"Who breaks into a library? How the fuck did they get in here?" Gress paused to adjust the skirt of her black suit, and she tucked her tube of dark blue hair mascara further into her pocket. She hadn't finished applying it to the inside layer of her rough black hair, but there was no time to think about that now. "I was working in here because Kyrett asked me to look for any books that his students could use for their History projects. No one should've been able to get in here after I locked the door."

Gress paced around the library and chewed the back of a pen until the nurse arrived. The nurse asked who was to be seen, and Gress requested that both, actually, be looked at.

While she wanted the younger woman to consult Clerski first, the Classics teacher was impatient to ask about a small mark that had appeared as of late just beneath the left side corner of her mouth, so she supposed asking now was better than wasting time finding the nurse again later.

"Gress says I must be tired," she heard Clerski explain to the nurse. "I guess I should've bought that amethyst a few weeks ago when I saw it so it could help me sleep better."

You were going to buy it and I told you not to.

"Though, Gress is always complaining about waking up in the middle of the night, so she needs it more than I do."

Gress let out a small *hmph!* and scooped a few books up from the floor. "Get back to your problems. I don't want her to diagnose me with anything."

Clerski proceeded to tell the nurse about her night, and how she could've sworn she saw Gress in a psychic's shop. “It was definitely her. Same height, looked the same age, and her hair was pretty similar, except maybe a bit of a blowout. Gress, why don’t you style your hair like that more often?”

“Funny, I could’ve sworn I saw her here last night,” the nurse mumbled to herself, causing Gress to further doubt Clerski’s story and giving her an out to the hair question. “Well, have you been sleeping properly? Eating well? You don’t have a fever, do you?”

The nurse talked with Clerski for a long half hour, with Gress hovering around the library, listening to the new personal stereo that she had only been able to acquire as of late.

“My dear?”

The nurse turned around when she had finished with Clerski.

“I think she’ll be okay,” the nurse reported.

“I know she will. That’s not what I wanted to ask about.”

Gress sat on Clerski’s antique wooden desk and chewed her pen. After a deep sigh, she pointed, with the back of the pen, to the small mark below her lip.

“That’s new,” the nurse muttered. She closed her eyes and her brow furrowed, as if she was deep in thought. “Let me take a look at it, please.”

"Huh, okay."

The nurse thoroughly inspected Gress over the next fifteen minutes. The teacher tried to convince herself that she was okay, but the nurse, the wavy-haired and astute Sakura Odile, furrowed her brow more and more as she inspected the older woman.

"I can't find a reason for this to be here. It’s nothing you’d expect on your skin as you age, but it’s certainly not, er, *malignant*. I wouldn't take Rerell's word for it; she suggested it was a bad omen of some sort. Or cancer. Ignore both suggestions, yeah?"

"When's it supposed to go away?" Gress asked, folding her arms over her chest.

"Not sure it will, my dear."

Nurse Odile turned around quickly, and as if she somehow knew she had business elsewhere, she exited the library swiftly.

Gress chewed the back of her pen again and gave an exasperated sigh under her breath.

Gress pretended as she moved to her next class that she didn't mind the new mark, or Clerski's erratic behavior. She couldn't help but to be distracted, though.

"Huh?"

A student bumped into her, falling to the ground in front of the Classics teacher.

"What class do you have now? You're going to be late."

The eighteen-year-old girl in a flowing sundress collected her books. Her deep brown hair pooled gently over her dark shoulders as she retrieved them. If Gress recalled correctly, this student was Ross Bastet from her second slot graduating class.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Rendal. I was working with Mr. Arlot again."

"He's going to ruin your honors grades if he keeps making you late," Gress sighed, making a mental note to scold the History teacher later.

"Hall pass," said a voice behind the two. Kyrett Arlot, a 35-year old blond man with his hair in a long braid and gently handsome face, casually sauntered up to where Gress and Ross stood, waving a pink slip of paper that matched the sun pattern on the family heirloom silver band around his neck. He cleaned his glasses on his white shirt and tucked the hall pass into the pocket of Gress' suit jacket.

Gress grimaced, but she accepted the paper. What was there to say to Kyrett? Although he was one year older than her, he was carefree in a way that she was not, but considering Kyrett's loose classroom management never hurt his students' grades, she had no choice but to put up with their difference in ideas.

But, about that difference in ideas… maybe it was that Gress just didn't want any part of whatever the History teacher got up to. Not since he accidentally took her and some of her now-colleagues a few

decades back into the past with that heirloom of his, in an attempt to find his dead wife. It was an absurd concept Gress still didn't believe, but if it was easier to hold down a teaching job because of it, she could pretend she had been moved to an outdated rural town. She had done a good job convincing herself of it so far. It didn't inspire confidence in Kyrett's bullshit, though.

"I was going to let her off the hook, anyway." Gress' voice was dead serious and particularly calm. She removed the hall pass from her pocket and tossed it back at Kyrett. "You're wasting paper."

"You're in a worse mood than usual today!" Kyrett mused, but his gentle eyes betrayed concern. Gress looked away. His concern always made her feel like she was under a microscope, even if it was a particularly useless one.

"Fuck off."

"You promised not to say that word at work. The principal made you sign off on it."

"She can fuck off, too."

She knew she was being harsh, but what could she do? A trashed library, a frenetic Clerski, a mysterious skin mark, and now an irresponsible colleague? How ridiculous! Just this one day disrupted the two and a half years of uneventful, even days she curated since getting *here*, to this *time*.

"Pardon me," Ross interjected politely.

"Oh, just let her go to class already." Gress exhaled loudly. "On track to be valedictorian or not, she still needs to be on time."

Kyrett nodded and let Ross go; the latter scurried to class. Gress turned to go to her own next class, already mortified that she would need some excuse or another to justify being late on her own strict attendance policy, but Kyrett addressed her again.

"Gress, *please* speak to me after your next class."

Kyrett nonchalantly blew a piece of his fair hair out of his face, but Gress nodded briefly, knowing that he was being serious. It was something about his voice. Kyrett Arlot's requests weren't usually made in the form of *pleading*.

What kind of day is this?! I bet they all agreed to mess with me specifically. Assholes. If that's the case, they can only keep it up for so long.

The teacher continued walking to her Classics class. If she could remember correctly, she had planned to teach her students about some Ovid poem or another.

Metamorphoses, wasn't it? Can't keep track of my own lesson plan today, damnit.

Gress put on her usual cold stare and walked into her classroom.

CHAPTER 02

The saleswoman packed up her tea leaves and tossed her scattered tarot cards back into their pack.

"Hey, are you ready yet?" Her attendant called. "I need to know when we need to book our flight."

"Call it off! There are still a few of them in this city!"

The attendant faced the saleswoman and, training his reddish eyes on her, placed her crystal ball in a velvet-lined box. "Teki, we took out as many as we could in the time we had."

Teki bit the cap off of a pen as she tried to decide what she was going to do. The very reason she had gone to the small town in the first place was because she, the human disguise of the sorceress Draecyon, had sensed a mysterious presence of power in the area. Power, she thought, that could only cause harm to anyone who found themselves in its path.

Draecyon hated power. From what she had seen, it could only cause trouble. She had seen countless times the effects of these occult happenings— sudden injuries without any other explanation, madness in an otherwise sound mind, and (though she was guilty of this herself, as she latched her sorcery onto a human called Gress Rendal for a remote viewing tether) possession of a mortal. Draecyon only used her own strange powers to eliminate those of others. Once she had completed her task, she would ditch her disguise, discard her own powers forever, and live in a world free from her greatest ill.

Until then, Draecyon, as the human woman Teki, could only stay at her shop in hopes that another would come in that had the same magical properties as her former customers.

Humans with the properties of draconic beasts, it seemed, lived in the town, though she had been to places with other anomalies in the past. She had succeeded in eliminating them every time before. If only her attendant didn't want to cut her trip short...

"Do you understand the result of this? Once I get off the plane, I'll have to copy another human's body so I can blend in with the locals, which means I can't keep track of that Clerski dragon through the eyes of the human I copied my current body from!"

And that was the root of Gress Rendal's new problems. As a consequence of Draecyon's tether to Gress, only one of them (the copied body that was Teki or Gress herself) could ever be conscious at once, as a strange caveat of Draecyon's ability to watch every moment of Gress' life. Gress wouldn't admit it, but she had been sleeping strangely lately, and that served to exacerbate the small problems in her otherwise meticulous life. Though she was just a pawn so Draecyon could keep an eye on Clerski, it was undoubtedly taking a toll and making her worried and irritable.

Anyway, her attendant had a point: "Teki, you do know that removing your magic from that human will kill her, right? It will cause a scene. It's best not to stir up trouble until the curse gets the dragon Rerell out of the way. Let's get out of here before Clerski dies and her visit here implicates us both. Then you can release Rendal so she'll bite the dust when we've skipped town."

"Daemon, you're not helping," Teki snarled. "I need two more days here. If we leave now and the distance is too large for my tether, Rendal dies before Clerski. No one will let Clerski out of their sight in case something happens to her. It's too big of a risk."

Teki paused to chew her pen again, a habit she had subconsciously picked up from Gress when viewing through the latter's eyes. Teki hated it and switched it for her cigarettes when she caught herself doing it, but as her own days got shorter to see more of Gress' life, she forgot to buy enough to last this time.

"So, make it easy and curse Rendal. As long as she's asleep and you're in this Teki body when the curse gets her, you can get rid of her body without a fuss," Daemon suggested. "If it looks like a health thing, no one will watch Clerski closer."

"Of course! Track her down. Infiltrate her job. Give her a stone and tell her it's for good health. It'll make her look like she's worried, but it will be the thing that kills her. Take the black tourmaline stone and give it to Rendal. Now, hurry, knock me out so she wakes."

Daemon made Teki sit down before he proceeded to slam the velvet-lined box into her head.

A pair of deep blue eyes opened in the dark. The clock read 3:30 AM.

The first sensation Gress felt was a headache, no doubt caused by her erratic sleep. After a minute or two of willing herself to get out of bed, she was grateful that the dull pain started to fade. Then again, she always had a headache whenever she suddenly woke in the night. She wished she was allowed to wake to her morning alarm for once.

I think that as if something's forcing me to wake. What a stupid thought. Rerell's getting to me.

"Hello? Anyone in there?" An unfamiliar voice called, muffled by the front door. Three knocks, and another inquiry, and Gress assumed the racket must have caused her to wake.

"Don't come in. It's early and you woke me up. Go away, I need my sleep."

At least, Gress realized, she was lucky to have someone to blame for waking her. Then she wouldn't have to worry about if there really was something wrong with her or not.

"Rerell Clerski entered a prize draw a week ago. She won this, it's supposed to help with good health," the young man called from outside.

Gress figured he had to have been shouting pretty loud. *He's gonna wake all the neighbors.*

Yet, despite her exhaustion, the tired teacher stumbled down the staircase, wrapping a blanket around herself as she opened the door.

"I assume Miss Rerell lives with you?"

"You assume wrong."

"She gave me your address." Daemon handed the crystal to Gress. "She must want to give it to you or something. Does she concern herself with your health a lot?"

That bloody Clerski. Who else would send one of these things to her address — (of course, Gress didn't know that Draecyon sent the crystal, nor did she know that Draecyon knew her address because she was viewing the teacher's every waking moment) — in the middle of the night?

She didn't know what (of course, Draecyon's hidden persuasion) compelled her to take the crystal when she did.

If she had been her same rigid self, if she had been well-rested enough to better be able to resist Draecyon's subconscious suggestion, she would've thrown the stone onto a desk and, muttering how she didn't believe in that spiritual crap, left it to collect dust.

She *would've.*

And yet, she didn't. Because somewhere inside, in the depths of her mind, something, *someone*, wanted her to give the healing crystal a chance.

If only that something was looking out for her better interest.

She thanked Daemon, told him to go away, and locked her door the moment she had it closed.

Gress decided that she'd wear the stone on a ribbon around her neck when she went to work in, oh, only a handful of hours now. "Only to test it out, though. If it doesn't work, wearing it around will be nothing but a pain."

Oh, how it *would* be a pain. Gress had no idea just how much of a pain this crystal would be.

Returning to her room and tossing the blanket down, she flung herself back onto her bed and tried to scrape up what little sleep she could get before her day began.

"Why the Hell am I awake?"

Still collapsed over her spinning chair, Teki opened her eyes and reached for her painkillers. She hated waking so soon after viewing through Gress due to the pounding headaches caused by getting Daemon to knock her out.

Pulling herself to her feet, Teki noted that Daemon was already gone and so was her stone. Her head cleared long enough for her to pull back the memories she had collected while in the back of Gress' mind.

She's going to wear it to school. Then I can move on and find a new body.

Teki gave a dull grin at the thought. She waited for her painkillers to kick in when she heard the landline phone ring.

"What now?"

"Hello?"

It was one of Teki's acquaintances. He was the one who arranged all of her flights. Despite that, he didn't know her true identity as Draecyon, nor did he know that besides Teki, he had arranged flights for all of her previous bodies.

"James! I had an issue with my bags; I'll be at the airport shortly!"

Teki didn't know why she made such excuses to James. A habit from her former host? A *scrap* of humanity? She shook it off. She didn't have feelings. Not for a mortal!

Did she…?

No. She couldn't have had any feelings for him! In fact, she'd prove it to herself by—

"Hello, Teki. I know it's not right to do this on the phone, but…"

Get on with it, Teki thought. *If I can't get a flight tonight, I'll stick with my original plan and we can book it for two days from now.*

"But… Will you marry me?"

The icy-eyed saleswoman wasn't expecting that.

James Gallen was, to say the least, a certainly influential figure in a well-known and respected accounting firm. He controlled a number of smaller companies, but the one he put the most pride in had gained him a lot of success. This was to say that James Gallen's flight arrangements for Teki were never part of his job or even part of his field, but he did it, seemingly, for personal enjoyment.

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"O-of course I will," Teki muttered into the receiver, stumbling over her words. A marriage proposal? Her? Not that she thought she *wanted* that kind of thing, but for James…? "Yes!"

"I know I shouldn't have done that over the phone, but I've been a little compromised recently, so I couldn't fly over. Your ring should've arrived earlier today. I asked Daemon to put it in your tarot box, since I knew I wouldn't be able to ask you in person."

Sure enough, upon the saleswoman searching, there was in fact an engagement ring inside of her box of tarot cards. It hadn't been there when she packed them back up earlier in the night.

"Well, I have your flight arranged for tomorrow evening. Once you arrive, we can start planning the wedding, can't we? Good night, dear. See you soon."

James Gallen hung up and Teki dropped her own receiver.

Suddenly, a wave of terror sank into the spirit's mortal form.

If she were to let Gress be cursed by the stone, said to give good health but made to do the opposite, and the teacher died from it, Teki's mortal form would go with it. She had always just made new ones for each place she travelled, but James *didn't* propose to whatever her next human disguise would be! While previously she would've loved Gress to take the damage and free her, Teki couldn't marry James as someone else. Even if the marriage happened first, what if he wouldn't love her for any of her new bodies?

Teki couldn't stand the idea of losing James, not over *this*. After all, she hadn't felt that way about anyone before.

I have to call Daemon, Teki decided. *He can watch my counterpart so she doesn't take me out by accident!*

"Daemon, pick up the bloody phone," the fortune teller hissed as she dialed the rotary phone.

"Hello? I just delivered the stone, so I'm gonna find a hotel to stay in for the night," Daemon sighed through his brick phone, a bit of laughter in his voice.

"Get back here, Daemon. It's not that far to walk. I'm going to need you for something, so stop trying to find something to entertain yourself with."

"Okay, okay. I'm on the way back."

Daemon wasn't on the way back.

James had already called him to tell him about the wedding, so that gave Daemon some time to relax. That is, he had time to relax until he had a sudden realization.

Daemon was sitting at a nearby bar with a group of women that he had been talking to earlier in the night when he realized much of the same that Teki did. They'd have to get Gress Rendal on that plane too so Teki could have her wedding.

"Damn," he muttered, finishing his drink and briskly escaping the bar. "Do I have to bribe her, then? She doesn't sound like the type to take a vacation, let alone for the destination wedding of the sorceress trying to ruin her life. Let's see. What could convince her to get on that plane?"

He figured that the angular dark blue sports car sitting in the lot would be more than enough payment to get Gress to see his way.

CHAPTER 03

"Hey, you never came to see me yesterday evening! I don't know if I should be hurt or worried!"

This was the greeting that Gress was met with when she stepped into her classroom. Once again, she was a bit late, due to troubles that morning getting the ribbon for her new stone clasped.

"Come on, Kyrett, I was rather occupied."

"Oh? So I should be worried?" Kyrett paused, his light-hearted smile changing to a solemn face. "Actually, I have a reason to worry. Our dear colleague, Miss Rerell Clerski, seems to have gone missing in the night, and… I guess I wanted to tell you before you found out the hard way."

Gress hated seeing Kyrett when he was upset. It was like he was a totally different person completely. Back in their old lives in the future, his family, a respected and heavily feared aristocratic family, caused him to bear quite a bit of repression and guilt, let alone the whole widower thing. When Kyrett was upset, he became pensive and hesitant, and all of a sudden Gress couldn't pretend this new life fixed everything. His grief was so distracting that Gress nearly didn't catch the content of his words.

"Bullshit, she's not gone. Did you check with the nurse? Did she call in sick?"

"Gress. I'm sorry."

Gress lowered her eyes to the floor.

She clenched the stone on the black velvet ribbon around her neck. For what she knew, it was supposedly Rerell's last gift to her. Was it some kind of message? She couldn't have been sure.

"If we find her, we should go back home," said Kyrett.

Gress looked up again and shook her head almost imperceptibly. "What? No. No, we can't do that, you know how good this has been for us. For myself, for Rerell, Nurse Odile, and… and you…"

"It was an accident, Gress, and it's clearly too dangerous in this time. Rerell's library was destroyed and now she's missing. Sakura has been shaking all day, so I didn't have the heart to tell her about Rerell. You're a mess, Gress, and you have been for a while now. Let's find Rerell and go home. I've already filed a missing persons report."

"She'll come back."

"Have you met my sons? The eldest has taken up the family's research. He has a beautiful wife now. My middle son is a world-famous chef. The youngest, he's a botanist now," said Kyrett.

"What does this have to do with Clerski?" Gress pressed, near-shaking herself.

"Coming here wasn't an accident. It was to protect them and you three. If it's safer to go back once we find Rerell, we have to go home."

Gress felt her eye twitch.

Steal me away from my life and call it an accident, and then threaten to do it again when things are going well here?! Just when I convinced myself this was normal, actually! Fuck you. Clerski is fine. We'll find her, and it will be for a normal reason that doesn't involve uprooting our lives again.

"You're pretending again. I know that look. This is all terribly real, Gress."

Gress steeled her dark gaze and steadied herself.

"...Protect us three from *what?*"

Kyrett had told the story before. He had become possessed by a demon named Beta, who killed his wife Casady and threatened his three sons in a way that, for a while, tore his family apart. To protect them, he granted them each an heirloom band much like his own, with his aristocratic family's own particular sorcery bound to them. But

Rerell and Sakura were (allegedly, as Gress wasn't sure she believed all this sorcery crap) dragons, and vanquished the demon. Gress was told she helped them somehow, but she was convinced that was just what they all said to make her feel included.

It was the same story he told now. "Anyway, Rerell made sure my family stayed safe, while Sakura took over when I was transferred from the prison to the hospital. She helped me hide the medications they were trying to give me there. My medication wasn't for any pain. They start to think you're an absolute loon when you talk about possession, you know," he laughed regretfully. Kyrett's laughter stopped abruptly and he adjusted the white fur collar of his long silver coat, which he wore on particularly cold days (neither his nor Gress' classrooms had a working heater anymore).

And the story always ended the same, no matter what mood Kyrett was in when he told it. He gave charge of the family to his oldest son, gathered Rerell, Sakura, and Gress herself, and *accidentally* brought them to a rural town in the past through his heirloom band.

But of course, this time was different, because he admitted this time it wasn't an accident. It was the first time she ever believed the story truly. Dragons? Demons? *I'll believe any of it if I really must, if it means I don't have to leave this town. Ever.*

"You think they want Clerski because she's a dragon?" Gress asked, raising an eyebrow and folding her arms. "How would they have found that out?"

"Gress," Kyrett sighed, appealing to her with another rare pleading look. "It's Rerell. She told someone, probably."

"Checks out. So she was kidnapped then?" Gress felt a wave of relief knowing Kyrett talked as if he was certain Clerski wasn't dead, and kidnapping was a theory she could get behind. If anyone could get kidnapped in a town like theirs, it was Clerski and her horrible luck.

Still, I knew that spiritual stuff was nonsense. She bought that stone of hers to help bring good fortune. Last time I checked, getting kidnapped is just the opposite.

"Wait," Gress said. "Actually, she went willingly. At least without a struggle."

"Huh? How did you come to that conclusion?" Kyrett asked.

"Easy. Her head is full of absolute crap. Do you know how few people listen to her about that stuff? I bet someone asked her advice and hours of chatter would distract her from showing up to work."

"I see your point, I suppose."

"And she's not hard to lead astray. They wouldn't need to waste energy in a proper kidnapping. They could just trick her with that woo-woo shit she loves. She'd go willingly. Anywhere."

The two breathed a synchronized sigh of relief. Clerski would always be Clerski.

"Although…"

"What."

"One thing bothers me, Gress," Kyrett said. "You believe me this time."

"And why does that bother you? Isn't that what you wanted? If operating on the logic of your story is the only way to make this make sense, I'd rather believe you and get Clerski back."

"You say that, but I can sense it. You *actually* believe me this time."

"Yeah, yeah. I believe your dragon stories and your evil possession thing. Get on with it, Kyrett. What are we going to *do* about Clerski?"

Kyrett glanced down towards the silver heirloom band on his neck. The pink sun pattern glowed briefly before pulsing in cerulean blue once. "I just contacted my eldest son. He has psychic abilities. He transmitted that Rerell's at the airport. In that case. I'll get the same flight route as her tomorrow. Stay in class, keep teaching, pretend nothing's wrong. My substitute won't know where I am; she'll be told that I was in a motor vehicle accident. I'll send you updates frequently."

Can't you just leave it to the cops? Your son is in the mid-2010s, Gress thought. *He could be wrong. Isn't time shit weird?* Yet, the Classics teacher didn't voice her thoughts. Instead, she nodded and chewed on her pen again. When Kyrett grimaced at the gnarled end, she put it down and fiddled with the clasp on her tourmaline stone. The damned thing fell when she twisted the clasp the wrong way, and the stone clattered roughly to the tile floor.

Gress gasped sharply as pain ripped through her back, and she failed to disguise it as a cough. She collected the stone and returned it around her neck. She brushed the ordeal off as shock that the pendant fell, or pulling a muscle the wrong way.

"Don't be gone for too long. Exams are a week away and your students might need you," she said, collecting herself.

"I'll leave them in good hands. Maybe better hands than mine." Kyrett adjusted a few papers on his clipboard. He tilted his head up and analyzed Gress behind his glasses, but ditched his analysis when he saw the time on the clock behind her. "Hold on. Come to my office. I asked Ross to meet us there to discuss Clerski."

Kyrett led Gress into a small room to the left of a narrow hallway. It was a relatively small room, all in tones of warm browns. A cherry desk occupied most of the space in the square office. Gress' breath hitched in her throat as she pushed open the door — that damn back pain!

"How did you get an office? Only about five teachers have those," said Gress.

"They just gave it to me when the last History teacher retired. Easier than updating the syllabus. Enough about that, though. Something happened to you just now."

"No, it didn't. I leaned over the wrong way. Don't concern yourself with me. Hey, why have I never been in here before?" Gress glanced around the room again. All she saw of note was a potted Gerbera daisy flower sitting on Kyrett's desk, a few leather-bound books, and an old family photo.

But as she looked around, she felt the stickiness of blood on her back. That couldn't just be a pulled muscle.

As if things couldn't get more chaotic, Ross Bastet slipped into the office and sat on the desk, except, something was different about her. Though her face was mostly hidden by a large patchwork hood, Gress knew she had changed somehow. Maybe it had something to do with her new cat-like body.

Unlike Ross' human appearance, this new form of Ross had the body of a sleek, bipedal panther. Her legs were like those of a kangaroo until they ended in a lion's paws. She had a thick, swaying

tail. Upon lowering the brown patchwork hood, the creature was revealed to have the head of a panther, as well, except with glowing emerald eyes.

"Christ alive." Gress thought for sure that this whole day was just a fucked up dream. Ross? Her student Ross? A panther? Things like that weren't possible. *Except when Kyrett's involved, it seems.*

"You fucking didn't," Gress challenged. "You did *not* turn my student into a cat. What is *wrong* with you?"

"Oh dear," Kyrett said. "What bad timing. It was the only — she was — remember last year when — oh dear."

"It's okay, Ms. Rendal," Ross said, though her voice was tight and strained. "I'm sorry I missed so much class. I'm healthy now, though."

"She's not stuck like this," Kyrett clarified. "She switches forms back and forth at will. Er, I don't need to tell you that. You've been seeing her go to class normally."

"Normally? *Normal?* Her voice, is she okay?"

The tall feline raised her hood again and placed an angular mask over her mouth and nose. In a rasped voice, she hissed, "I don't breathe your air. I breathe carbon dioxide now, but I can breathe now, isn't that amazing?"

Gress could have been sure she saw Ross Bastet wince as she spoke.

With Gress still in shock that her student could turn into a cat now, apparently, because of Kyrett's meddling, she almost forgot her injury.

"Okay, Gress, this is relevant, I promise," Kyrett stammered. "Ross will be coming with me to find Rerell. Her senses will be good for tracking Rerell, and—"

"Her cat senses."

"I'm sorry, okay! It was that or let her die. Did you read her doctor's notes?"

I didn't. I just sent the homework packets. Gress' heart sank. *Oh my god. I'm sorry.*

"And when I said, you know, I can fix this, I can help you, I can make it so you can breathe carbon dioxide and live, she wanted some perks of her own choosing," Kyrett explained. "The cat stuff was her idea!"

Ross nodded. “It was.”

Gress looked over Ross and exhaled slowly through her nose.

“Alright,” said Gress. “Hey, Ross. You're going to be missing a lot of classes still, huh?"

The cat uncomfortably waved her black tail across the hardwood floor, but then she saw that Gress was smiling slightly. She realized Gress had just given her permission to go on the plane with Kyrett.

"I guess I will be."

Kyrett breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, I suppose we should clue up everything that needs to be done. I trust you'll take care of the flower on my desk? Between us, Ross can breathe now because she’s connected to that flower. I did increase its lifespan, but its life force sustains Ross. Don't let the flower wilt, please."

"Please take good care of me, Ms. Rendal," Ross requested. She pulled down her patchwork hood and contorted back into her human form. The cloak hung loose over her shoulders and mostly obscured her, but when Gress paid attention for the first time, she was relieved to see that Ross looked *well*.

"I thought you were leaving tomorrow," Gress mumbled.

"We are, but I need to get a doctor's note for my, um, accident. I need to make my story believable, you know."

"You know what would make it believable? A better story. You don't need anything so complicated."

It was as if Kyrett didn't even hear her, because he just kept planning his fake accident.

Whatever he had to do to get Clerski back so everything could go back to normal, Gress supposed.

"You know, Gress," Ross spoke after a few long minutes of the three standing in silence. "You should do something about your back."

"Yeah, it's bleeding through your suit," Kyrett added.

So they noticed after all. Assholes.

About to take off her suit jacket to prove she couldn't have been bleeding as much as they insisted, and it had to have been explainable, Gress removed her tourmaline again and tossed it to Kyrett's desk. The sturdy wood chipped some of the thin striations.

Gress' eyes widened as her back suddenly erupted. Her vision blurred and her head spun. *What happened? How did I get injured? That bloody crystal is supposed to help with my health! Why isn't it working?*

Oh, right. That stuff doesn't work.

Everything was a blur for the Classics teacher as Kyrett and Ross tried to support her. Once they had lifted her onto the cherry wood desk, Kyrett proceeded to inspect Gress' wounds through her blood-soaked jacket.

"You could cut someone with these shoulderpads," mused Kyrett, brushing Gress' hair forward over her shoulders. "You sure that's not what happened?"

The Classics teacher let out a weak groan. Kyrett apologized and proceeded to take a closer inspection of her back.

Gress' usual rigid demeanor dropped as she clung to consciousness, barely squeaking an answer out when Kyrett carefully pressed the surface of her back and asked her to tell him where it hurt.

"I'm going to take your jacket off, okay? It's soaked."

Gress gave a sharp nod.

"Oh my goodness. Your back is shredded up."

"Hurry," Gress wheezed.

"Right, right. Sorry, Gress. I'll send Ross to get Nurse Odile."

The student nodded and left the office in a rush. Kyrett only took his eyes off of Gress once to make sure Ross had followed his directions.

It took every bit of strength in Gress to keep herself from flinching when her bespectacled colleague began cleaning the mysterious cuts on her back. With even the slightest touch, her injuries felt more and more unbearable — how terrible for the one who had to bear them! And how it did sting!

Gress could only take comfort in the fact that she knew that she was in good hands while Kyrett was there to tend to her. Despite his usual

carelessness, she was surprised at how focused he was when he firmly and quickly wiped away the excessive blood that poured from the woman's destroyed back.

Ross was in her feline form again when she entered the classroom again, which indicated that she must've rushed back in a hurry, at such a pace that her human body would not allow for.

"I can't find the nurse, Mr. Arlot," she reported.

"I'll have to fix her up myself. It's been a while since I've had to do anything like this, but I can't leave her in this condition. How did this happen? It was only us three here the whole time."

"Please just do whatever you can," Gress groaned, her voice weak and shaking. She kept her request low, not out of shame that her curated composure left her, but because she couldn’t strain it to a normal volume.

But Kyrett would take care of her, and she had to be sure she would recover in time for her first class. After all, if anything happened to her, the disappearance of Rerell Clerski and Kyrett's sudden accident could be brought to the attention of the student body, and who knows what kind of a hassle could present itself then?

CHAPTER 04

Gress sat on her desk with her arms folded over her chest, not even turning her head when her students flooded into the classroom. It was as if she had turned to stone.

Despite her sudden misfortune earlier in the day, Gress was fortunate enough that her teacher intern started that day, and after a quick orientation session and a tour of the school, said intern showed up to help Gress.

The intern, of the name of Daemon Ryers, was fairly tall and well built, with hair bleached pure white with red at the ends. His eyes were reddish and calm, and he wore a white jean jacket over a gray shirt, a red scarf, and a red knit hat. He was 10 years younger than Gress, at only 24, but she supposed it could be useful at least to have his energy in the classroom.

Daemon proved helpful to Gress throughout the first lesson of the day. In fact, the teacher didn't have to worry much about opening her wound again, because Daemon was eager to teach his first class. Gress couldn't help but to be surprised as Daemon taught her class that he was not at all strict, unlike herself. Still sitting on her desk, acting like nothing was wrong, Gress gave a small grin as she watched the students as they attentively stared at their intern.

She wiped the smile from her face before Daemon turned around halfway through the lesson.

"Hey, Ms. Rendal, how am I doing?"

I've heard that voice before.

"Fine enough. You have their attention. Keep it up."

Daemon addressed the class again. "Okay, so there's something I'd like to try. You all did well on the last test I just handed back for Ms. Rendal, so as a reward for being such a good class, how about I give each of you a tarot reading?"

Daemon had sent the class into chaos.

"Don't worry! Everyone will get a turn! But I'd like to give a demonstration with your teacher first, so please bear with me."

"Watch it, Ryers," Gress hissed.

"Oh, so you don't believe in fortune telling? Can you come over to the front of the class for a minute, please?"

Daemon wouldn't have known about Gress' injury, so she could hardly refuse his offer for that reason. Yet, if she got up and walked to where he stood, she'd have to face the burning pain in her back again.

"I am at the front of the class."

Gress crossed her legs and forced herself to not let the pain show in her face from her movement. Technically, she was correct. The desk was at the front left of the classroom.

The whole class laughed as silently as they could. Even Daemon joined them with a grin and a few chuckles of his own.

"Okay, you're right. How about we start already, huh?"

Gress only walked out of her classroom when she was sure of the fact that all of her students had gone home. Once again, she found herself in Kyrett's office, hoping she'd see him again before he left.

Sure enough, he was sitting at the cherry wood desk, reading one of the books from a stack that usually lay in his desk drawer.

"Huh? Come in," Kyrett greeted, his attention still glued to his book. "Oh, hello, Gress. Tough day?"

"Yeah. I got the intern today. That one has way too much energy, and he's starting to piss me off. Tried to embarrass me in front of my class this morning, too."

“Someone’s mad about the Emperor reversed?”

“So you heard.”

Gress stepped into the small, dimly lit room and sat on the desk, as there was only one chair in the office and it was occupied by its owner. Kyrett motioned for her to turn around.

"Let me take a look at that wound, would you? I'd at least like to know if it's been doing any better."

Gress removed her suit jacket and the top that matched her dark nylons, and then she lay face down on the desk so Kyrett could inspect her injury. She grabbed the nearest pen to bite onto so she could distract herself from the pain as Kyrett removed the old bandages.

"Hey, don't chew on that one! It's a souvenir from Maine, 1999! Do you know how long I'd have to wait to get another one of these?"

Gress threw the pen at the wall and cursed under her breath.

"So, I'll take that as your way of saying that it still hurts." Kyrett paused to give Gress a moment to run off a bunch of expletives before he finished changing the bandages.

In that moment, Daemon ambled into the now-crowded office.

"What are you staring at?" Gress hissed.

Daemon glanced at Gress’ injury, then at the stone that was clenched in her fist. While he wanted to be proud that Teki's original plan was working, he flinched nonetheless. If Gress was careless and ended up letting the injury get the best of her, Teki would be out of luck for her wedding.

Would Gress be up for following Teki by plane in this condition?

"Hey, you're doing it wrong, Teach. Let me deal with that," Daemon spoke up, after finding himself staring at the woman who lay wounded before him.

"Mr. Ryers, is it? I have everything covered here." Kyrett stopped talking abruptly, disinfected Gress' wound another time, and turned back towards Daemon. "She’ll recover well. We appreciate your concern, but you won’t be needed for now.”

I swear he disinfected that cut again just to make it look like he knows what he's doing. There was no need for him to do that a second time, Gress thought, becoming increasingly annoyed. *Maybe I should just deal with this myself.*

Out of his own feelings of annoyance towards Daemon, Kyrett wrapped the fresh bandages without much regard for the fact that Gress was unprepared for his sudden actions.

"Hey, be careful with her," Daemon snapped. Kyrett lowered his head slightly in shame.

"Of course. Sorry."

Daemon stared at Kyrett with his striking reddish eyes for a solid thirty seconds before he struck the latter in the head and took Gress in his arms. "I need to get you onto a plane as soon as possible."

“Call the nurse for him, asshole!” Gress hissed.

“No time. I’ll explain on the way.”

“He’s fucking unconscious.”

“Do you want to be, too?” asked Daemon sharply.

“Don’t you fucking—”

“Then come with me!”

Gress tried to struggle out of Daemon's grasp as he pulled her through the school hallways and out into the parking lot. She stayed rather silent the whole time, though she grimaced and let out an exasperated sigh every now and then. It confused Daemon.

"What's wrong?"

"If you're going to kidnap me, you shouldn't be so loud about it. It's still the early evening in broad daylight. Were you not thinking about that?"

Gress decided that if she wasn't in any condition to kick the shit out of her attacker, she'd try to stall him as long as possible.

"Huh? I'm not trying to kidnap you. I'm driving you to somewhere you'll be able to get help."

Daemon let go of Gress' arm and pointed towards the (stolen) dark blue sports car.

"You don't think I'm letting you drive, do you?"

"Fine enough, take the keys, then," Daemon sighed.

Gress caught the keys as they were tossed to her, but she didn't make any attempt to get into the vehicle. "Daemon. I need answers. Do you understand? You're going to answer me or I'll send you in for Clerski's disappearance."

"Hey, hey, hear me out on this one..."

"And for stealing that car."

"Crap. Fine."

Gress sat on the hood of the car and glared right into Daemon's eyes. "First question. Are you the one who delivered this rock to me? The one that Rerell sent?"

"Yeah, I am. And I'd suggest it might be best for you to hold onto it, since it will help us find Rerell."

"So you're not taking me to a hospital, after all. Figured."

Gress twirled the keys around her finger. She knew how to get answers.

"And, for that matter, what's this you said about getting me on a plane?"

Daemon froze.

"I know where Rerell is. I promise she wasn't kidnapped, either," he slowly spoke after he recovered from Gress' question. He wished she'd get a little more panicked, at least, so she wouldn't poke holes in his story.

"Can't you bring her here?" Gress quizzed.

"She's at the airport with my friend."

"Oh, so you need me for something and you're using Rerell to lead me out?"

"Something to that effect." Once again, Daemon froze for a minute. Was he convincing Gress to join him? Or… would he have to tell her everything about Teki?

"Care to explain?"

Daemon hopped onto the hood of the car, somewhat leaning up over Gress so the two would both have enough space. "Not really."

"I'm getting the feeling you really don't want my help, after all," Gress sighed, acting rather disinterested in Daemon's request. She sat up, which led Daemon to fall off of the car's hood.

"You're right, Gress." Daemon stretched his arms back behind his head and grinned a wry grin. "Though, don't you want to know what she needs you for?"

She?

"It doesn't matter to me if you help or not, I guess."

"Who is this *she* that you mentioned?" Gress chanced, wariness in her voice and a scowl in her eyes.

Daemon must've thought he was closer to getting Gress' help until he stood up, pulled his wallet from his back pocket, and retrieved a film photo. After pausing to look at it, he hid the exhausted look in his eyes and carelessly threw the picture towards Gress.

"Teki Darace. This is a photo I took when she wasn't looking. How else would she let me get a picture of her?"

The photo, as Daemon said, showed Teki, sitting in her wedding dress in her little shop. Gress figured, upon sizing up the film, that if Daemon wasn't so reckless when talking to others, he'd make a good professional photographer.

"So."

"Hmm?"

"That's your wife?"

Daemon barely just kept himself from pushing Gress off of the hood of the car. "You can't be serious, right? Teki and I? No way."

"Figured. Who is she?"

"You know, a friend of mine. She's getting married soon and she's short a few bridesmaids. She told me to find someone responsible to fill in, and who better than a bunch of teachers, right? So... Rerell's already at the airport with Teki."

My important task is to be a bridesmaid? This is ridiculous.

Gress was almost hoping that Daemon was joking. Anything had to be more believable than this, right?

"And I maybe need you to join us?"

He has to be kidding.

"Then we'd only need two more."

Does Teki not have friends?

She didn't ask this question aloud, though. If she was to be helping Daemon and Teki later on with the wedding, she wouldn't want to have the bride-to-be angry with her.

"Fine, but make sure you get my back fixed if we're not stopping at a hospital first. And let me scrape Kyrett off of the floor."

Gress hopped off of the car and walked back into the school with her hands in her pockets and a face that was void of any emotion, as if

she didn't want to let on that she knew that she was going to be gone for quite a while. There was no way to explain that one reasonably.

"Miss Rendal," Ross greeted. The teacher couldn't get used to seeing the student in her panther form.

"Ross. I'm leaving. Tell Kyrett to be careful."

"Yes, Ms. Rendal. I'll pass on the message."

Ross Bastet seemed, in Gress' opinion, less afraid of her than she did before. Maybe that was the trade off when she saw Gress' wound and Gress saw Ross' cat abilities. If only Gress had time to be relieved!

Gress turned around and watered the potted daisy, turning around to speak just once before leaving the office again.

"You take care, too. Be careful, got it?"

CHAPTER 05

That night, Teki woke to an alarm that Rerell Clerski had set.

"You said your flight was booked for tonight, didn't you?" Clerski asked upon being questioned by the sorceress. "I looked at your ticket earlier, so I knew when to wake you."

This alarm wasn't necessarily an alarm, but rather a record player that Clerski had been sitting by, waiting for the late hour to arrive.

"I didn't show you the ticket," Teki snapped quickly. "When did you look at it?"

Teki didn't realize it, but Clerski, as a dragon, had an interesting ability. Whenever the librarian saw something, she could store the image in her mind for future use, zoom in on small details, and even transmit the details to the minds of others. Often, she used it to sort through the information on where each book was stored in her library, right down to an exact location.

That ability was also how Clerski could retain the information from Teki's plane ticket despite seeing it only once from a distance too far to read it from.

Although… Clerski didn't want to tell Teki about that yet. She hadn't even told Gress about it, and she didn't know if Teki (despite running a fortune telling shop) would believe her. There were only two people who knew — Kyrett and Nurse Odile — and only because Clerski once took night classes alongside the nurse with Kyrett as their professor, and she got herself caught using her ability during exams.

"I saw it briefly earlier, Teki. Photographic memory." Clerski pushed her glasses further onto the bridge of her nose despite the fact that they weren't falling off. It wasn't a lie, exactly.

"Huh. Well, I suppose I should be glad that you woke me. That Rendal one must have been staying awake for quite a while."

Teki sat up in the recliner that she had been sleeping in. She knew that some of her own bad luck was due to her close proximity to the crystal that she had given Clerski. After all, as the stones did the opposite of what she claimed to the customer that they did, Clerski's stone for averting misfortune did nothing but draw it nearer.

She decided that she'd keep her distance from the dragon during the flight.

Teki grabbed her luggage and rushed out the door of the small cabin that she had broken into. "You did get a vehicle for us, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid not. The guy who offered us that truck got hauled in for questioning a few hours ago. Apparently he stole the truck that he was trying to rent to us."

Clerski walked back inside and grabbed a personal stereo, putting the earbuds in Teki's ears. Then she tossed the audio that her mind had recorded onto the device.

"This is the news report from two hours ago. They must be airing it again over the radio."

Teki nearly threw the stereo across the small river that ran alongside the cabin. "What are we supposed to do?"

"It's still dark out."

Clerski walked back out the door and began shaking. She grimaced as her body contorted into a different form, that of a large, white dragon. A wispy tendril trailed behind her head like a feathery mane, and when she had finished changing, her arms had transformed into a wyvern's wings.

She could only hope that Teki would also transform. After all, she knew Teki was a dragon, but she didn't know if the bride-to-be was capable of flight or useful magic.

Teki grumbled a bit about having to waste her energy, but when she began to change, there was no sign of any pain across her own contorting body. Despite the fact that her entire body structure was changing, she was perfectly calm and she didn't feel any more uncomfortable than she usually did.

When her body finally went still, the creature that stood in the yard made Clerski's heart leap.

She knew the beast before her! It was Draecyon, a beast with the jaw of a fox, the ears of a wolf, and with wild eyes that flickered with cold blue tones. Its body reminded Clerski of that of a draft horse. Its wings, which were too large to rest at Draecyon's side, were suspended in a way that made it look as though Draecyon was about to propel itself into the air at any time. Its legs, strong and coated in the same layer of beige-gray hair that coated the rest of the beast, ended with a tuft of fur that was reminiscent of that on the hooves of the same draft horse that seemed to lend Draecyon its stature.

"Draecyon? You call yourself Teki now? I didn't recognize you! I would have come to your shop sooner if I knew it was you!"

"You didn't tell me you were the white wyvern either," Teki hissed. "If you introduced yourself back then, I wouldn't be in this mess!" She paused, realized she didn't want to admit to cursing Clerski, and ruffled her wings sharply. "You should have told me. Do you know how many people reek of dragon that aren't as reliable as *you?*"

Clerski tilted her elegant head, accepting the compliment despite remaining unaware that Teki had fully intended to kill her previously. "I haven't seen you in years! Years in the future…? How are you enjoying this era? Isn't it nostalgic?"

"We're going to pretend I'm not from your time. Kyrett lost track of me and I don't want him playing time traveler again now that I'm about to settle down."

"Ah, I see. Okay..." Clerski paused, then she asked something she had been wondering. "You said you needed me to help you with something. What is it?"

"If you make fun of me, I'll kill you."

"You know you wouldn't."

"I'm… getting married. I need help with the wedding, and I need help keeping Rendal from dying so I can keep my life as Teki."

"Wait, you're getting married? Congratulations!" Clerski exclaimed.

"You mean it? You're not going to torment me?"

"Would I ever?"

Once again, Clerski paused. "And Teki, you're connected to... Gress Rendal this time, huh? So, that's what you meant when you said something about her earlier..."

The two stood still in the cabin's yard, the wind brushing against Clerski's feathers and Draecyon's fur.

"We should get going," Teki snapped without answering Clerski.

The two dragons, almost simultaneously, pushed themselves into the night sky. They had been at the airport earlier, so they knew the way.

Their first flight was booked for that day, but it was supposed to be much earlier.

Teki and Clerski, using a rented car, had overcome the task of finding a parking space and they had made their way into the airport. Clerski held tightly to her stone to ensure her good luck (still unaware that her old friend had lied to her).

"Why is this taking so long?" Teki grumbled. She tossed her single bag of luggage to the floor near her feet, causing one of the inspection dogs to sniff at it. "Cut it out. There's nothing in there for you or your owner," she muttered under her breath.

Clerski's bag drew a little more attention. After all, it jingled from all of her trinkets and its scent, from her unlit candles and incense, drifted around the airport. Even though it passed the test from the security dog, the other people waiting for their flights grumbled and complained in hushed whispers.

"Damn, why is everyone glaring?" Clerski asked.

"It's your bloody bag! You have more crap in there than I have in my shop!"

“But I can’t just travel without it! What if I need anything?”

“Then you sort it out with whatever you have nearby. Anything can be made into a charm if you put enough energy into it.”

"Not everyone can do that, Teki!"

"That's quitter's talk."

The two slowly increased their volume until those who weren't staring before had their eyes glued to the pair.

"Teki," Clerski finally addressed in the middle of their argument. "Look at that sign up there."

Teki paused and, rolling her eyes, glanced at the sign. Their flight had been postponed.

I'm standing too close to her misfortune stone. Damn thing is giving me bad luck now, Teki thought. "What are we supposed to do now? Our bloody flight won't be taking off until tonight!"

"I guess we just have to go back."

Teki descended towards the pavement outside of a dilapidated building, much to Clerski's surprise. Just out of sight, a jet black sports car (stolen for her by none other than Daemon) sat waiting for her.

"This is better than flying the whole way. It was good to stretch the wings for a while," Clerski said, her wyvern body rippling back into that of a human.

"Get in the car and stop wasting time."

"Someone's suddenly grumpy."

"Get in the car. I have to make a stop."

Teki waited until Clerski was in the vehicle, though before the white-dragon woman buckled up her seat belt, she slammed her foot onto the gas pedal.

"This is excessive, don't you think?"

"Of course not. There are no cops around."

"What if we crash?"

"Then you're my new airbag."

The loud car zipped through another dull side street, catching only the attention of a stray cat that yowled at the vehicle as it passed.

It seemed like merely half of a second had passed until Teki pulled up at… a dress shop? Clerski wondered if the bride-to-be had not yet picked up her own wedding dress.

"If you must know," the spirit hissed upon Clerski's inquiry, "I needed it tailored."

Clerski was told to stay in the car when Teki went to get her dress, so she turned on the car stereo as loud as it would play. The yowling cat leaped over to join her. It flicked its ear and sat in the driver's seat after climbing into the car from the door that Teki had left open. "Hey, that's where Teki was sitting."

The white-furred cat flicked its black ear again.

"She's going to be mad when she gets back, you know."

A flick of the tail.

"You can sit in the back seat if you want."

The cat yawned.

"How about on my lap?"

The cat simply curled up in the driver's side seat and fell asleep just as Teki exited the tailor shop.

"What is that cat doing in my car?"

"Hey, I tried to stop it," Clerski defended over the blaring music.

Teki turned the stereo down, only for a reply of, "I was listening to that song! It's on my favorite record!"

"I didn't turn it *off*. Now, get that cat out of my car. Bet the owner is looking for it or something."

Teki took the cat in her arms and it began swiping at her, though it eventually stopped and seemed to pretend that it didn't care whether it stayed in the car or not.

"If he doesn't have a tag on his collar, won't they take him somewhere?" Clerski asked.

"Huh? I guess so. I sense the owner coming for it soon. It should be fine."

"Hold on."

Clerski dug around in her bag and pulled out a gold trinket.

"It's the lucky cat charm. I figured it would substitute as a tag, and the owner would know that the cat was safe while it was gone." Clerski fastened the lucky cat to the stray cat's collar.

"Fine, now can we go now? We have a plane to catch and I don't want to miss it a second time."

Teki, once again, floored the gas pedal, and the stereo (back on blast because of Clerski) could hardly be heard over the sound of the vehicle. Now that she had her dress, there was nothing left to do except to go to the airport and wait to board their flight.

Well, that and make sure that Gress got on the plane safely.

Clerski wasn't sure if Teki knew that she could only stay within a certain range of Gress, but she was worried. Had Gress been told by Daemon? Did Teki know they were being followed?

She could only hope that Daemon contacted her again soon.

CHAPTER 06

Gress woke on the hood of the blue car.

A familiar face greeted her, though it wasn't Daemon's. *Where is that intern, anyways?* She wondered.

"What are you doing in the parking lot?" Nurse Odile asked. "Gress, are you sure everything's okay?"

If only she saw my wound earlier.

"Gress. Your neck is bleeding."

A look in the side mirror and a pause to recognize the injury as another perfect cut made Gress realize that she didn't know how long she had been bleeding before Nurse Odile had arrived.

"Ah. It missed the important bits. It's fine."

"No no, let me take a look at it, my dear," the nurse insisted.

"Why do you care? It's nothing."

Nurse Odile sighed and adjusted her black dress. Her hands shook slightly.

"I should be concerned for you, looking like that and all. What's with the shaking?"

"Gress, my dear, you're awfully on edge today. You didn't sleep out here, did you?"

"Answer my question first—"

Before Gress could finish, Daemon jumped Nurse Odile, and while he held her arms behind her back, he didn't hurt her.

"Huh? Oh, it's just you, Nurse."

Daemon let Nurse Odile out of his grasp, and the older woman stormed away angrily.

"As for you, Gress, I didn't expect you'd actually stay out here all night. You were pretty tired, huh?" Daemon pushed his hair out of the

way of his eyes. “Well, it was a warm night out and I was here to watch out for you, so a night under the stars might have been just what you needed.”

Gress stood up, wiping the blood from her neck with the bow on her suit jacket and being careful not to get it on the suit itself. A bow could be replaced. She didn’t want to lose two suits in a week.

"Sure. Maybe."

Briefly, Daemon’s eyes met hers. Were they more magnetic than they usually were? A mysterious feeling sank into her. Something, she didn’t know what, was reacting within her to the boy’s hypnotic eyes. *Something's different about him.*

“Ah, you were telling the future.”

“Oh, so you noticed the box with the crystal ball in it?”

“I noticed your stupid grin, the one you only get when you’re doing your divination crap.”

Daemon chuckled, but those magnetic eyes held a trace of disappointment.

“Well, we need to get to the airport. Come on.”

With a level of irritation due to having to pick the ignition with a hairpin, Gress started the car. “Drag Kyrett out here. He has plane tickets, and we don’t.”

“I’ve been up all night guarding you,” Daemon sighed in exasperation. “You do it.”

“As long as you tell me one thing.”

“Got it.”

“Why am I really getting on that plane?”

“Damn you for figuring it out, Gress. I’m sure you know you’ve been possessed by something. Let’s make it simple. Due to your evil spirit, if you leave a certain radius of someone in particular, she’ll die.”

“The bride.”

“Bride-to-be, yes.”

Gress got out of the dark vehicle and gave a small *hmph!* Her deep blue eyes shone with a glare of disgust and anger. Of course! She knew she wasn’t simply being asked to be a bridesmaid because she was a good candidate! She was simply a body tethered to the victim of some unfortunate demise!

“Why should I go?” Gress hissed through a clenched jaw, her teeth almost grinding against each other from the pressure. “Why should I go to the wedding? One good reason.”

“I can’t tell you yet, Gress.”

Gress’ face remained constant in bitter emotions; Daemon gave up trying to understand her expression. It would be easiest for him, he figured, to retrieve Kyrett and Ross. Maybe they could convince Gress that everything would work out fine.

He hated seeing her so entirely pissed off. Maybe it was because for what she knew, and even what she didn’t, she had every reason in the world to be.

“I’m gone to get the Teach,” Daemon muttered, his head tilted towards the pavement.

“Wait…”

Did he hear that right? There wasn’t a trace of anger left in Gress’ voice. Anguish, sure, but no anger.

“I’ll go in with you. I need to get the potted plant from Kyrett’s desk.”

“I didn’t mean to keep it from you. It’s not easy to explain that your friend is possessed and your boss’ life depends on it.”

Gress suddenly snapped back into her cold demeanor. “When did we become friends?”

Daemon still knew Gress was bothered.

He also knew that it would be best not to push the subject too far.

"Huh? I don't recall being knocked out," Kyrett mumbled to himself. "Mr. Ryers, when did you do this?"

"Last night. Well, yesterday evening when you had finished wrapping Gress' bandages. You should be more careful, you know, since it seemed you were being so, so careless with her."

"You're one to talk."

"This is ridiculous," Gress sighed in exasperation as she and the two men waited for Ross to reach Kyrett's office. She reached for a pen, but Kyrett stopped her with a quick glare.

"That one is from my hometown. Don't you have any less destructive hobbies?"

“You're bringing it upon yourself, leaving them all out on your desk in the open. Anyways, who collects pens?”

"I collect pens, thank you very much. Leave them alone, it’s all I have!"

“Don’t pull the dead wife card now—”

Daemon, uninterested in the lighthearted bickering, went through Kyrett's junk drawer in hopes of finding something entertaining. "A deck of cards, huh? Do you play?"

Kyrett turned his attention to Daemon. "Why, what games do you know?"

"I was about to ask the same, Teach."

Gress started throwing Kyrett's pens into the wall. "Don't play against him, Daemon. He rigs his deck and has a tendency to cheat."

“I would never,” Kyrett lied. “I only play fair and honest.”

"If he cheats, I'll know," said Daemon.

"Oh, you want to challenge me?"

"Of course, Teach. You can pick the game."

The door opened.

Ross walked into the small office to see Gress sitting on the cherry desk and throwing Kyrett's souvenir pens, Kyrett dealing a hand of cards (which game, she couldn't tell), and Daemon carefully watching Kyrett as to prevent him from cheating, though she could clearly see a few cards already tucked up the latter’s sleeve.

What kind of group was she getting involved with?

Gress took a moment to swap her bloodied suit bow for a clean one before addressing the group.

"You all knew Rerell wasn't missing."

"To be fair, it's not the most believable thing to say *hey, I need you to be a bridesmaid because you're cursed with the same curse the bride-to-be is cursed with,* you know," Daemon defended. “You don’t exactly believe things easily.”

"And what's your excuse?" Gress turned to Kyrett.

"I honestly thought Rerell was missing. I was going to go after her myself, remember? But now that I know that you need to stay close to this Teki woman, we have no choice but to all go." Kyrett tossed down a card that was tucked in his sleeve while Daemon was distracted. "Daemon, you lost again," he said after only a moment's pause.

"Ah. I see," Gress sighed. Her expression remained still, though her voice wavered ever so slightly. "I suppose there's nothing I could do. I guess it wouldn't be too much trouble to go to her wedding if it means she won't disintegrate or something."

"Shall we get going?" Daemon asked.

Kyrett packed up the cards and tossed them back into his desk drawer. "Of course. Don't forget to bring the flower."

Gress started the sports car and waited for everyone to pile in.

"Shotgun," Daemon called, knowing that Kyrett would want that seat. The two silently glared at each other, but Kyrett sat in the front anyway. Daemon sat next to Ross and held the flower, but he kicked the back of Kyrett's seat a couple times for good measure.

"Would you two get along for once?" Gress muttered. She held onto the white flower that sat in the terracotta pot mysteriously labeled *Wilt*, which Ross didn't take her emerald eyes off of. *So this thing is connected to Ross' life the way Teki must be connected to mine. I suppose the two must be somehow similar.*

"Gress. Did you give it some water?"

"Yeah, yeah, I did."

"Not too much, I hope. Root rot."

"I'm fucking rotted with you. Shut up." Gress slammed the gas pedal extra hard and peeled out of the parking lot.

"Mr. Ryers, what time do we need to be at the airport?" Ross asked.

"As soon as possible. Teki should already be there, if the information Rerell sent me was correct."

"What, did she call you or something?"

"Nope. Somehow she sends me videos, photos, and audio clips. They show up wherever they'll play, usually a TV or my record player or stereo. Then again, it's not a surprise that the evil spirit wanted to get rid of her because of that."

Kyrett's attention was piqued, and he stopped digging through a bag of cassette tapes in the glove compartment.

"Ah, so it is her. I figured as much, since most evil spirits don't bother with that kind of goal."

Gress huffed. "Would you at least explain what's going on?"

"Of course. Your spirit seems to have a thing against powers. Abilities, magical traits, whatever you wish to call them. She's trying to eliminate anyone with them because she believes that they're the root of evil deeds."

"That's ridiculous."

"It is, isn't it?"

"But that means the bride-to-be must have something."

Kyrett breathed out loudly. "Maybe. I don't know who this bride Teki is, but I'm afraid I know which spirit — sorceress — is connecting you to her. I don't know the extent of the possession, either."

"So she has control over me."

"Not necessarily, Gress. I believe she, at most, may only be strong enough to influence your minor decisions subconsciously."

"That's definitely reassuring. Makes me not want to trust myself. There's something wrong with this."

Gress turned on the stereo and drove onto the main road.

"Meet... meet us... at the... door. Black... car..." The stereo echoed, each word filled with static. Gress assumed that this was Rerell's dragon power that she had been told about.

"I forgot I stole the black one for them!" Daemon exclaimed. "Huh. If only we had a way of telling them that we were on the way. That's one thing I haven't sorted out yet. You know, since I've just been calling them by phone, but I don't want to risk calling a public payphone in case someone else picks up the receiver."

"She has to know where we are if she sent the message to the car stereo. I figure she's using one of Teki's crystal balls or something to watch our location."

"Gress, I didn't tell you that Teki was a fortune teller. You had no way of knowing that."

"Damn it, this is stupid. I bet it's the connection to her from that bloody spirit."

Gress turned the stereo up once it started playing music again and continued driving to the airport.

CHAPTER 07

"What do you mean," Daemon began. "When you say I can't bring the flower?"

"Sorry, Sir, but you're going to have to hand it over to us. We can't have it transported on our flight and therefore we must dispose of it."

"Huh? Are you sure I can't just take it back home?"

Daemon had never been on a flight before without Teki packing all the luggage. He had only ever been on a plane alone once, and that was just for a quick trip to Paris. Yet, of all the time he had spent talking to James, not once did the man mention anything about not being able to carry a plant onto a flight.

Almost as if he was trying to be intimidating, Daemon gritted his teeth at the security worker, blowing his light bangs from his face through a clenched jaw and keeping a stronger posture.

Gress averted her eyes. Surely she simply didn't want to get involved.

Well, if we have to sort this out, I guess he's the best one to do so. He'll make that security officer see our way.

"Hurry up and hand it over."

"Only when I can use your skull as a bone meal fertilizer."

Though, I didn't know he was so serious about gardening. That would maybe be cute if he wasn't so damn violent about it. I think he's overdoing it a little.

The guard sneered.

Now he's pissing me off. Hurry up and wreck him, Daemon, so we can get going.

Kyrett's approach wasn't nearly so violent. "My sons used to do it all the time," he explained to the group in a hushed whisper. "If you

don't get the answer you're looking for from one parent, ask the other in hopes that they'll take your side. Works well for security, too. You just need to ask enough of them."

"I hope you like wasting time like that," Gress scorned.

Gress regretted her words when she saw a depressed glaze over Kyrett's eyes as a sigh nearly escaped his lips. Was he hurt by her constant dry commentary? He didn't get anything like that from anyone except for his middle son.

Gress huffed silently to herself.

"Because there's no need of it if I'm going to do it for you."

Kyrett's eyes lit up again and those same lips that almost parted with a sigh did so with a smile instead. "Thanks, Gress. But if you'd rather go off and do your own thing, that's fine, too. We can meet you wherever you want when we're done here."

Gress couldn't help but grin, herself. Kyrett's smile had to have been at least somewhat contagious. *No, not contagious. Relieving. I've been so damn on edge since I got that odd mark beneath my lip, and with my evil spirit injuring me and having to find Rerell, and then learning that I have to stay close to a bride or she'll die… that damn smile is just what I need.*

"Nonsense. We're going to get this Wilt thing on the plane for you and Ross."

Gress walked off to find a friendlier security guard, pulling Kyrett along with her.

"Ross," Daemon addressed, wrapping himself around the flower Wilt so it wouldn't be taken. "Are you okay? You haven't said anything for a while."

Ross let out a sharp breath. "Sore throat," she mumbled.

Daemon knew that was a lie. From the way she acted, it was much more than that. If only he was good at reading people's emotions as he was their fortunes…

"Anyways, you dropped this earlier and I figured you'd need it." Daemon opened his hand to reveal a small inhaler to Ross. "Your mask filters carbon dioxide for you to breathe as a… whatever your feline form is, but you only need an inhaler when you're a human, is that it?"

Ross nodded.

“I hate to say it, but I guess Kyrett was pretty clever after all.”

The student lifted her inhaler to her mouth and breathed in. “Thank you for returning this, Mr. Ryers.”

“Please, call me Daemon when we’re not in school,” Daemon requested as he removed a water bottle from his back pocket and allowed the clear liquid to thoroughly drench the soil. “That’s better.”

Upon noticing Ross’ look of appreciation, he handed her the water bottle and told her to keep it.

“Hey. It’s clear. Get yourselves over here.” Gress’ voice droned at the two from a few meters away. A security guard lay near the wall, slumped over and groaning. Kyrett glanced at the guard through his peripheral vision, clearly worried for any consequences of Gress’ actions.

“He gave us a pass. Come on.”

“I did not give her permission to do that,” Kyrett muttered, his voice wavering.

Daemon took Ross' hand and led her over to meet up with the others again.

"So, our next step is to meet with Rerell and that bride," Gress declared.

"And how are we supposed to find them in this crowd?"

"Daemon. Don't you have some sort of fortune telling power?"

"That won't help us here. Too many people to single out one person's next actions."

"I suppose we should start searching, then."

Gress turned around and walked into a smaller crowd that had gathered. *I'd think that Rerell's white hair would be easy to spot.* She took a hold of Daemon's arm, pulling him away from Ross.

"Stay close. I don't want anyone else to have to look for."

"Got it. I'll try to sense Miss Clerski's presence while we walk around."

"You seem to be focused on something else."

"Do I?" Daemon asked. "I guess I do. How did you know?"

"You said that you couldn't use your psychic crap to pick her out in a crowd. Tell me how that suddenly changed."

"Fair enough. I was distracted just now. I'll look for her like anyone else would."

Daemon paused and gripped Gress' shoulder. Evidently, he noticed something that she didn't.

"Gress, I want you to stay right here. Don't move. I need to get Kyrett and Ross."

"What's wrong?"

"Just stay here."

Teki's arms were folded and her head tilted downwards when the group approached her. Kyrett was the first to approach once Daemon pointed her out, and requested that the others stay back for a moment.

"Well, this is a surprise. I'll try my best not to wake you since we need Gress right now."

Teki didn't reply, but Clerski, sitting next to her, glanced upwards. Her face lit up in recognition.

"Kyrett? I'm sorry to keep you worried. I guess you thought I was kidnapped, huh?"

"I know exactly what's going on, I'm afraid."

"So do I. But I can't bring myself to ruin the wedding."

"Neither can I. We'll save Gress after? Make it look like an accident?"

"Teki... isn't that bad when you get to know her."

Kyrett laughed under his breath. "Oh, I do know her, and I know her well. I brought her here, remember? She must think I lost track of her. Her stunt with Gress ruined that for her."

Then he paused.

"But I will try to get Gress to resist Draecyon's control. It'll make it easier to separate them, and maybe we can explain this to James after the wedding. I hate to do this, though. If only we had gone home sooner. We wouldn’t have to risk Gress’ life over Draecyon’s marriage."

“When do you plan to tell her that Draecyon came with us from our home time too?”

“I don’t. And don’t you, either.”

Clerski stopped to check her watch. "We need to get on the plane soon."

"I suppose we do."

"Will you join us?"

"Do I have a choice? Actually, I won't be directly near you. I'm sure Draecyon— um, Teki— would recognize me and she'd figure out that I plan to take Gress' side."

"Ah. I see."

Kyrett stood up, adjusted his silver coat, and nodded briefly to Rerell. With that, he walked back to where he had left Ross.

But he didn't expect to see Daemon standing by the student.

"Ryers. You should be with Gress."

"Hey, don't get me wrong here..." Daemon began, but he was cut off by the surprisingly concerned teacher.

"Please, tell me what happened to her."

Daemon explained as quickly and concisely as he could that he could sense that Gress was about to get injured by something (which he didn't reveal was the stone that he had given Gress) and that they had to get her onto the plane without notifying anyone, including the woman herself, of her impending doom.

"Oh, is that all?" Kyrett asked. "The flight's about to be boarded. How much time do we have?"

"Three minutes."

Kyrett's eyes narrowed. "Don't you ever let her get hurt by Draecyon without telling me in advance ever again, now that I know you can tell before it happens, got it?"

Yes, now that he remembered that Draecyon was using some sort of curse on Gress, he didn't feel bad over taking his new friend’s side over his old friend’s.

"Yeah, I'll make sure to let you know, Teach," Daemon lied, wishing Kyrett would stop making him feel responsible for Gress' safety. His job, he reminded himself, was to make sure Gress made it to the wedding. After that, he decided, he wouldn't follow any more of Teki's requests,

but nor would he try to protect Gress Rendal from her curse. He only worked for Teki because he almost lost his powers to her. For the situation he was in now, he'd trade those to get out of this mess in an instant.

Keeping an eye on Clerski and Teki, Daemon walked back to Gress. He couldn't keep his voice steady when he said in a whisper, "I think it's time to go. Keep your eyes forward and don't stop, no matter what."

Gress didn't want to say anything, but from the quick stinging in her shoulder, she knew that she, too, had to pretend nothing was wrong until they got onto the plane.

She let out an exasperated sigh, stepped forward, and kept her pace steady with the rest of the group.

Gress and Daemon were four seats from the front, on the right side of the aisle as viewed from the front of the plane. Kyrett sat directly in front of her (as he preferred the window seat), and Ross was beside him. If she noted correctly, Teki and Clerski sat two rows behind her.

Not that any of this was important, except for the fact that above all else, Gress wanted to be absolutely sure of where everyone sat, in case something happened.

Gress couldn't remember how she ended up on the plane. Teki had to have woken up, which due to the evil spirit (as she didn't know the spirit was the same as Teki), she figured Teki waking had sent her to sleep.

She didn't remember Daemon forcibly administering to her a small capsule and the fact that she nearly knocked him out in an effort to fight it.

Daemon's bruised arm did remember that part.

Gress also didn't remember, or rather she didn't know in the first place, that one of her allies had possessed her and walked onto the plane simply by acting from within her.

If she had known, she probably wouldn't have been so relaxed during the start of the flight. She read through a travel guide, nudging Daemon every now and then to point out something that made her feel uneasy.

"There aren't any restaurants near the hotel. We have to take one of those metro lines to get around."

"That's okay; James said something about transporting our vehicles over here."

"Ah. Okay." Gress went back to reading the brochure.

"Watch your shoulder, Gress."

"Hm? Right."

Gress covered her wounded shoulder with her hand, hoping her blood only stained the shoulder pad. She could replace that later, but the suit jacket itself would be harder to replace.

"Hey, are you okay? You don't look too well..."

"I'm fine. Forget it."

The truth was, she wasn't fine. Looking out the window, she saw the ground get further and further away. Everything became small in her vision and it made her feel rather sick.

She felt the opposite of fine.

Gress Rendal *didn't* like air travel.

CHAPTER 08

Gress had never been on a plane.

When she and Daemon chose their seats, Daemon had taken the lead. "It'll be easier if you sit on the inside, near the window. That way if anything happens to you, I won't have to climb out over you to bring you to safety."

"You think I'm going to pass out?" Gress asked absentmindedly.

"Have you seen yourself lately? You're pale as a ghost and you're mysteriously bleeding."

Gress stared out through the window. She thought, *why do I have to watch how far up we are? This might get rather troublesome.*

Now, as the plane had reached so high an altitude that everything below was merely a speck in one's vision, it was all Gress could do to keep quiet and try to think of ways to distract herself from her view.

It was a good thing that she wasn't a dragon like Rerell or a dragon-like spirit like Draecyon. She would've never been able to get off of the ground, wings or not.

"Where do you suppose that river leads?" Daemon asked, also trying to distract Gress.

"The ocean."

"Oh. Right. Which one?"

"Atlantic."

Gress, mildly annoyed by Daemon's frivolous questions, listened to Clerski, who was playing an audio she had captured with her ability. If Gress guessed correctly, it was from James.

"Hello, Miss Clerski. I hope you get this soon. When you do have the chance, I would like it if you let Teki listen to it as well. See, I've been

thinking about whether we should do an indoor or outdoor wedding. Please get Teki's opinion when you get the chance."

Just a generic call. Nothing interesting about it.

"I thought about an indoor wedding, since interior design is Teki's thing, but there wouldn't be enough time for her to work her magic."

She'd want to try.

"But outdoors, we'd have to think about the weather."

The dress would be a hassle if there's wind.

Gress didn't know a thing about Teki or her preferences. These thoughts were unlike her own. In fact, if it were up to her, Gress would have suggested the outdoor wedding to avoid paying for a venue. In reality, Teki was trying to make a decision through Gress, as she was too impatient to wait until later to make up her mind.

As Gress didn't know this, she was convinced that her evil spirit was somehow trying to connect to Teki and accidentally influencing her, as she was the one who was awake.

Before she even realized what she was doing, Gress dug through Daemon's pocket for a small pill bottle. Daemon didn't stop her. He figured that Teki wanted to wake, and that could only happen if Gress were to go to sleep. He watched as Gress appeared to swallow the small capsule from the bottle, but he kept an eye on her as she sank into a rather sudden sleep.

The woman who rode on the top of the plane sensed a shift in the energy in the plane. Every movement from within, every bit of energy released, it all painted a vivid picture in the mind of this woman.

She knew for certain where her targets were and which passengers she would spare. No use getting innocent civilians injured, she figured, so she would patiently wait until the plane landed before showing herself fully. However, she didn't wish to wait until the plane reached its destination to begin her plan.

No, she wanted to eliminate those she had marked as quickly as possible.

She would have to cause some kind of distraction. It'd have to be something that would force the plane to land without crashing it or getting even so much as a single hair damaged on an innocent passenger.

She needed a plan.

The woman in the black dress steadied her breathing. The more she calmed, the more her hands shook. Not good for a dragon hunter. A former nun, she tried to pray to steady herself. Maybe she wasn't devout enough for it to help her anymore. She would proceed with her plan nonetheless.

She had reserved a particular seat, directly behind one of those whom she had marked, under the name of Quin Norris. This seat was unoccupied, but it would be crucial to her plan. This seat was right by the window that was the closest to the plane's wing.

Quin Norris, rather, the dragon hunter, leaped onto the wing and, making sure nobody was watching her by using her vivid map of energy, she phased through the window and took her place in the fifth row on the right side of the plane.

"You here alone?"

Miss Norris glanced sideways at the passenger beside her. "What was that?"

"I hear there's a nice, small hotel near the airport. You here alone?"

Miss Norris blinked and brushed the twisting piece of curled hair away from her right eye. Her lip twitched, but she wouldn't pay mind to such an uncouth passenger. Rude or not, hurting him would betray her mission. He wasn't who she was after.

"Are you listening to me? I'm asking if you're here with anyone!"

She hated dealing with people like this. Not only did she feel a sense of disgust at the way he spoke to her, but she despised him for *what* he was saying, as well. Dedication to avoid hurting the innocent or not, by this point she would've blasted him with the energy that she used to kill dragons if it wasn't for the fact that it would draw attention.

Miss Norris decided that he needed to be punished for his words, and she would give him what he deserved once the flight had landed.

The passenger to the front right of Miss Norris tensed up.

"Hey. She's here with me, got it?" This boy with the white and red hair turned his neck to face them both. "It's a shame I didn't know a jackass like you would be here, or I would've booked the three of us first class where you wouldn't be able to afford to torment my older sister."

Miss Norris froze. The person who defended her was the intern Daemon Ryers.

"Will you leave her alone, or will I have to escort you from this plane myself?" Daemon challenged the unruly passenger.

Despite the fact that she desperately hoped that Daemon didn't recognize her the way she recognized him, she had to admire his actions. He didn't have her same black and white sense of justice, but at least the troublesome passenger would get what was coming to him.

"Now, I'm not going to start a fight on this plane, because I need to get to my destination without any interruptions, but let me guarantee that you'll never speak to Quin that way ever again."

How, she wondered, did he know her alias? She figured that he must've checked the seating plan before he boarded the plane. She honestly didn't expect that he would pull a clever move like that. Sure, Kyrett would have if it had crossed his mind, but Daemon? That foolish boy was more of a threat than she thought he would be.

"Brother," she addressed, not wanting to reveal that she knew Daemon's name. "What did you do to him?"

It only took a quick sensing of the energy in the plane to determine that he, too, had a strange ability besides his fortune telling, which she knew he had picked up only in the last few years. Daemon's ability was...

"Can't give that away, Quin. Don't want anyone using that knowledge to my disadvantage."

...He gave the passenger horrible visions of possible outcomes of his future.

"Of course. You never change, Brother."

The passenger frantically begged the flight attendants to be moved. Miss Norris gave a brief thanks to Daemon and waited until he went back to reading a stack of Kyrett's old alchemical notes and listening to a cassette on his small personal stereo.

Waiting for longer than she wanted to in the hopes that all attention that the troubles with the rude passenger directed her way would be over, Miss Norris pushed her curls out of her face once again and pulled a lithe beast from her suitcase. The dog stayed quiet; Miss Norris had selected it herself from a litter of hunting dogs years earlier specifically for this task. It had been so much work to train it to go after the scent of dragons in their human forms, even more so to train it to go after whatever Ross Bastet was. On top of all that, she had to make sure it would be silent as she boarded the plane mid-flight, only barking to cause a distraction once it had pinpointed its targets.

It had not yet found those targets, it seemed. Miss Norris was disappointed, but then again, she had already found them conveniently by sight whereas the hunting dog had never seen them before.

The passenger in front of Miss Norris reapplied dark blue hair mascara and brushed her black hair over her shoulder in a quick but noticeable move.

Miss Norris frowned and narrowed her eyes but she didn't say a word to the passenger who was pretending to be asleep. How didn't she notice that Gress Rendal was simply faking it? The woman's shoulders were too tense, and though she didn't seem to be suspicious of anything, she seemed far too attentive to have been sleeping. But it didn't matter, Miss Norris figured. Now that Gress had given away her trick, she could adjust her plan accordingly.

She had to admire the quick thinking, though. Evidently, Gress had seen Miss Norris' shadow projected onto the wing of the plane. She knew that the spirit was influencing her decision on the wedding venue, so she took advantage of that and pretended to let the spirit wake Teki. Except... upon closer look, Teki's eyes were closed behind her sunglasses and her posture was not one of boredom, but one of sleep.

Miss Norris' hands shook more and she hid them under her white scarf to avoid drawing attention.

Now, she didn't show it often, but Gress knew when something or someone was behind her. Often, it had to do with the length of her hair being caught on, or even lightly brushed by, the offender. But this time it was nothing but pure instinct and a gut feeling that let Gress know that

Miss Norris behind her was bad news. Because of that, she didn't pick up on the dog that inched closer to her high heels.

It was only a matter of time before the dog attacked. It knew to attack her from the side due to a specific scent released by the mark that Norris had tagged Gress with. It was a good thing that she had many opportunities to test Gress' perception before she made her move. Honestly, she wouldn't have known otherwise to stay away from sneaking up behind the woman and she would've used a different tag.

The only reason she booked a seat behind Gress was to serve as a distraction. Her dog was the important piece on this playing field.

The dog had almost reached Gress' leg when...

"Someone's service dog got loose. Attendants?"

"Thank you for letting us know. We'll try to find the owner immediately."

Why would Gress say it was a service dog? Of course. If she hadn't, Norris realized, the flight would've landed and the dog would've been removed. Since the attendants believed it to be a service dog, they would instead focus on returning it to its supposedly handicapped owner. The plane wouldn't have to land.

"I'm sorry," Norris breathed, her voice steady as she stood up. She uncovered her shaking hands. "Please forgive me for letting my dear Marlon loose. He's usually such a good boy, so I'm afraid it is my fault that he escaped. See, I dropped my contacts earlier and Marlon here must've been looking for them..."

Gress nudged Marlon back towards Norris, keeping the dog close to them both firmly but gently. "This is a public flight. Some people are allergic to dogs, so I suggest keeping him on a harness. I'm sure my friend packed one just in case, so we can let you borrow it until the flight lands."

Kyrett handed a bright blue harness and leash to Gress, who handed it to Norris.

"Thank you so very much, my dear. I don't know what I would've done if Marlon went missing."

Beneath her gentle smile, Norris was rather mad. How did Gress know where the dog was?

"Remember, he could get troublesome for certain people if you're not careful with him." Gress turned around in her seat again.

Of course, now Norris understood. Gress had been carefully watching her companions in the row in front of her, and Ross Bastet was allergic to dogs.

She was sure she'd have to wait until the plane truly arrived at its destination, but a sudden twist of luck went her way.

"Attention, all passengers. Due to the weather conditions ahead, we will be landing at the next airport. Your flight will continue once the weather clears up. Thank you."

CHAPTER 09

"Allow me to carry your bags for you. It's the least I can do for you after you found my dog, lent me a harness, and helped with that troublesome passenger."

As all of the flight's passengers filed out of the airport, Norris made it quite clear that she wished to join the group of four. After all, as she explained to them, she didn't know the area well and Kyrett had displayed an impressive knowledge of their location when he suggested a hotel the moment the flight landed.

"Hm? Thanks," Gress sighed as Norris lifted a heavier bag with ease.

"Here, how about I give the harness back now? Marlon stays close to me when he's not in a vehicle."

Miss Norris removed Marlon's harness and handed it back to Gress, knotting a piece of fabric around it with the words hastily scrawled, as if written with unsteady hands, *"I am waiting for you to ask me about the mark below your lip. -Q. Norris"*

Gress accepted the leash, glanced at the note, and clutched it tighter in her fist.

"Stay close to me at the hotel," Gress ordered. "Book a room with me."

So, she was using her dog to get my attention. Maybe she can help. Still, I can't say I completely trust her...

"Of course. Marlon, follow me."

With that, Norris went on ahead to collect more bags.

Gress hadn't forgotten about the small spot on her face. It still worried her, and if it wasn't for the spirit knocking her out each time

that bloody bride-to-be woke, she would've likely been kept up at night thinking about it.

But she knew there were more important matters. She had to make it to the wedding, and she had to find out how to get rid of her connection to Teki. Even more, she didn't know when her curse would wound her again, and she was convinced that the only reason she hadn't bled out was because of the power in Rerell's healing stone.

Still, if she could get that mark off of her face along the way, she wouldn't pass up that opportunity.

Gress mumbled something about something finally going right and she picked up a few more bags.

"Kyrett. Ross. Daemon. Don't make our guest do all the work. Pick up some of this crap."

"Right, right. I'm on the way, Gress. Just having a bit of trouble with my— nothing, I'll be right there!"

That silver heirloom band around his neck is sparking. I've never seen him without it, though I assume it is what allows him to travel through time. Why would he hide an issue with it?

Gress suddenly realized. She had been hiding her problems earlier that week. Maybe, just maybe, she and Kyrett had the same sense of not wishing to disrupt anyone, no matter what the issue was. Sure, they'd both have their moments where they'd complain about small things, but real problems, problems that could shake the course of their journey, were (in their opinions) to be hidden away.

She would speak to Kyrett later, she decided, to make sure he would be okay.

"Hey. I'll take those. You don't look too well."

Gress took Kyrett's bags as they walked into the large hotel. Kyrett's face was flushed and he tugged at the collar of his white button up shirt, further worrying Gress.

"Hey—"

"I'm fine, Gress." Kyrett's eyes watered now. He still tried to maintain composure.

I'm pretty sure that thing keeps him alive somehow. If it's having problems, it better just be from altitude. I'm not losing a friend like that on this trip.

"Didn't your wife used to work here? Sit down. It's probably reacting badly to that, if all of this energy nonsense is something we have to contend with."

Kyrett's eyes lost their focus for a moment. "I'll be fine. It does this sometimes."

Yeah, because it reacts to your soul or whatever.

"But I'll be alright. I'm fine. I'm fine."

Kyrett didn't look fine. He certainly didn't sound fine either.

"I mean it. Put the bags down and find somewhere that doesn't reek of lingering wife."

"Alright. I'll make up for it by bringing them in later."

He thinks it'll make me proud to see him push himself beyond his limits, but it pisses me off. He'll end up seriously hurt like that. Every time that heirloom band breaks, he goes into some kind of coma, and he's never taken it off even when it hurts him. It can't break on its own, can it? Don't fucking die, Kyrett.

Gress expressed as much.

"It's called a Shield," he said, trying to reassure Gress. "I created it when I fell ill years ago. Connected it to my life. If the glassy surface breaks, you're right, I fall into a coma, yes. My eldest son was given his around the same time for a respiratory illness that almost took him from us. My middle son's was for an accident at an old kitchen job… although he didn't want one. It was the only way to save him. The youngest's was for a terrible fever that wouldn't leave him be. I guess it really is a family heirloom."

"You're okay with that? What happens if you take it off?"

"We don't take them off."

Oh. You die.

"But they do give us remarkable abilities, and we'd be dead by now otherwise. It's not too different from Ross and her flower. Or you and Teki," bargained Kyrett.

The reminder of her connection to Teki caused Gress to recoil slightly. "Give me the bags," she ordered. "Don't do a damn thing until there isn't a single scratch on that Shield of yours."

If broken, his Shield sends him into a coma. Maybe it isn't different than that evil spirit messing with the time when me and Teki are

awake. If he takes it off he dies. If I leave Teki's radius she dies. Maybe I'm Teki's Shield.

Gress flinched.

...I hate that.

A pleasant voice interrupted Gress' less than pleasant thoughts. "Ms. Rendal? What's wrong? You spaced out, and I've never seen you do that before." Ross held a stack of small bags in her arms as she approached her teacher.

"Oh, of course. I was just distracted by…" Gress looked around. "That raven over there on the streetlight. Sorry."

"Ms. Rendal… that's a plastic bag."

"Oh, forget it. Let's just go into the hotel already."

Gress only became focused on the travel plans again once it was time to register for a hotel room, and Kyrett took the liberty of booking who got each room to 'make up' for his troubles with his heirloom band. "Ross and Daemon are getting along, and Daemon can take care of the plant, so they'll share a room."

"Got it," said Daemon. "It'll be like when I used to go camping with my little sisters."

"Gress and I will take a room since we're closer as colleagues, and anyway, technically this started as a business trip," Kyrett continued.

Gress wanted to argue, but Norris had already started towards the counter and stated, "I was going to request a room with her, as we're closest in age, but I guess it can't be helped. Gress, come to my room please, as soon as you can tomorrow morning."

Gress didn't know how Norris knew her name. At this point, she hardly cared.

She slowly walked to her hotel room with Kyrett.

"I bumped into Rerell earlier," Kyrett said. "At the airport."

Kyrett waited for Gress' reply, but she didn't say a word, so he spoke up again in a large breath of exhaled air.

"Ah, forget it for now. I can tell we both need some time to settle down."

CHAPTER 10

The two teachers sat up in their respective hotel beds, Gress staring, disinterested, at the ceiling and Kyrett reading a particularly large book. Neither one of them spoke to each other for the longest time. Each appreciated the other's understanding that they each valued a particular level of silence.

Gress tossed her healing crystal up and down in her hand. She had to admit, while she would've preferred sharing a room with Norris, at least she wouldn't be bogged down with Daemon's intolerance for silence and "doing nothing".

"Gress."

"Huh? What is it?"

"I want to talk to you about something."

Kyrett's sudden beckoning startled Gress slightly, though her expression didn't show it. His request, however, was what truly surprised her. *This isn't good.*

"Is everything okay?"

"If you ever get scared by your evil spirit, tell me," said Kyrett. "If you ever do anything that scares you."

Gress paused. She adjusted her silk nightgown and sat on the edge of Kyrett's bed. "Oh, so it's my turn to say I'm fine."

"If you ever feel like you're doing anything that doesn't make sense for you…"

"I'm handling it."

"You can only handle something like that for so long, Gress," Kyrett said. He closed his book and moved closer to her. The bedside lamp threw a faint glow over them both. The room was too quiet.

"You're saying this for a reason. What did Clerski say to you in the airport? I assume this is related."

"Nothing gets past you." For a moment, Kyrett almost admitted what he knew about Teki. He almost admitted he knew Teki *was* Gress' evil spirit. He refrained. "Just let me know if you start to hallucinate, or think thoughts that aren't yours, or…"

"Right. You've been through this."

"I burned Casady to death because of this. Be careful, Gress."

"Beta did. It possessed you."

Kyrett met Gress' eyes mournfully.

"No, Gress. I did. We were in her lab and she asked me to bring her something to drink, so I went back into the house to make her a mug of this hot caramel cocoa that one of my former students taught me how to make. I brought the mug to her. She was waiting for me on the front step of the lab, just a shed I had built at the time. I handed her the drink..."

"And? That's when Beta killed her, right? You've told me this story before. Many times. It wasn't you."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't face it, but you need to know what can happen. It wasn't a mug of anything, Gress. It was a candle, and neither one of us realized it. And she had been, as I would later find out, working with a flammable chemical that caused her to spontaneously burst into flames. How I didn't realize what I was doing is beyond me. I knew I saw a mug of cocoa."

"I get it now."

"You do?"

"You did see it. My evil spirit sometimes distorts my perception of reality. Little things like making a picture frame look like a clock, which makes me feel certain I'm short on time."

"What if she doesn't have a use for you anymore? What if she does to you what Beta did to me?" It wasn't a distant possibility. Kyrett knew that Draecyon had let her mortal counterparts die before. He knew she wouldn't hesitate to do it again. If she did, he could never forgive her. He already couldn't forgive himself for not warning Gress. But Gress' safety depended on not knowing for now, and on believing Teki was a victim too. "What if she sees you as expendable?"

"Then she sees me as expendable. I haven't trusted myself since I found that mark on my face, so don't you worry about the things she puts in my head."

"Right. Don't end up like—"

Gress brushed her hand on Kyrett's shoulder to reassure him. She walked back over to her bed.

"Hey, you should get some sleep before you regret staying up to think about things."

"Oh. Of course."

Kyrett, as he turned out the light, couldn't help but to think of the gentle woman Casady that he thought he was to spend the rest of his life with.

He knew, right down to each word, that the last thing he told her didn't make a difference.

"I'll be back with your hot cocoa soon, honey. Please be safe."

Teki wouldn't make Gress ruin her life like Beta ruined his, would she? He didn't know her well enough anymore.

Kyrett shook his head as if he could shake away the thought, and he sank into a troubled, nervous sleep.

The sound of a low mumble woke Kyrett at 4:35 AM.

"...This is ridiculous."

Kyrett sat up in bed and reached for his glasses, and then he stood up and shuffled over to the light switch.

"Huh? Why are you still up? It's still dark outside, Gress. Go to bed."

The light flicked on and Kyrett was able to see his colleague, who sat in the middle of the hotel room's floor.

"Keep your voice down. I'm trying to fight it."

When Kyrett looked closer, he saw that Gress seemed to be focused on something he couldn't see.

"You're worried about what that demon of yours can do after what I said earlier, huh?"

"Maybe so. I've noticed her influence for a while, and I noticed that she's getting stronger. That's why I'm staying awake, you see. She's telling me to sleep, so I'm staying awake."

Kyrett walked over and kneeled down beside Gress. "So, she's either weak or you're strong. You hear her, but she doesn't control you?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"So, you're refusing her suggestions."

"Hm. I don't want her to have any control during the wedding. Don't want her going after the bride."

Both Kyrett and Gress stayed silent until the former stood up again.

"Well, I might be able to help with your evil spirit problem, but I require full, written permission," Kyrett said. "I'm sorry in advance. It's the only way I can help you, and I think we both know how bad this could get."

"Written permission? This isn't a field trip. What do you need it for?"

"Would my answer influence your decision?"

"Of course not. I just want to know what I'm getting into."

"Fair enough," Kyrett sighed. "*I'm* going to possess you."

Kyrett, after eliminating his own evil spirit, had been left with the ability to possess others, though he wasn't a spirit himself. He hadn't even told Clerski or Ross about it, so when he explained his ability to Gress, it would've been an understatement to say that the latter was surprised.

Yet, she wasn't worried. *He can't be very strong. He hasn't had time to train his abilities,* she thought. *I doubt he can even push the evil spirit from my mind, but what can I lose? He wouldn't do anything that my own spirit isn't already capable of.*

"Go ahead," Gress muttered, scrawling a permission form quickly onto an unused napkin.

She pretended that she wasn't even remotely bothered at the idea of Kyrett possessing her body, but in reality, she was already setting up a mental block to weaken whatever abilities he had.

Her mental block was shattered in seconds when Kyrett pulled Gress to her feet and, standing incredibly close (and too close for comfort at that) behind her, put a letter opener to her throat.

"I never go anywhere without it. See, I had a feeling you'd try to make a barrier in your mind with your thoughts, but a healthy bit of fear fixed that, didn't it?"

Though she wasn't possessed yet, Gress sensed a certain sense of power in the way he read her like an open book.

"Damn you," Gress hissed, trembling.

Kyrett pressed himself closer to his co-worker and his letter opener closer to the woman's exposed neck. Surely, though he seemed to be trying to act intimidating, he also balanced himself in a way as to make his fall lighter for the upcoming moments. Casting the letter opener aside at a calculated angle, his physical body dropped to the hotel's carpet flooring as his spirit entered Gress' mind.

"I didn't realize how much taller I am than you are, Gress," Kyrett mused. He spoke through the woman's body. Gress tried to stop his words, but she was powerless to do so. She panicked. It didn't reach her body.

Kyrett picked up a pen and frowned when he learned that Gress was right-handed.

He has total control, Gress realized. She had effectively become a spectator to her own mind and body.

"I don't possess women *often,* you know! I'm as uncomfortable with this as you are."

Don't even think I believe you for a second.

"Don't be like that!" Kyrett exclaimed. "I'm sorry, okay?"

Ah, so you can hear my thoughts.

Kyrett paced around the hotel room and chuckled silently to himself. "Of course I can. Anyways, let's get on with this. Now, I'm not going to defeat your demon for you."

Kyrett picked up his letter opener and ever so gently broke the skin on Gress' right hand.

I didn't think this is what you meant! Kyrett! I thought you'd be a passive influence, like my evil spirit is! That hurts, Kyrett, stop this.

"Can you feel it? I assume you can. I'm going to teach you how to overcome that spirit's suggestions completely on your own. It'll be natural to you when we're finished."

Gress was helpless when her own hand grabbed her throat and she became unable to breathe.

Her chest was paralyzed. She could neither take air in nor breathe it out. *I don't have much time before I'd pass out, but if he can control an involuntary action such as taking a breath, he can keep me conscious.*

"So, you want to breathe again. Do something about it. Fight my control." Kyrett's voice came, this time, from inside Gress' mind.

As much as Gress tried to inhale, even hoping for her chest to rise by just a little through the act of intaking much needed oxygen, her efforts failed and she remained still.

She knew Kyrett wasn't going to stop until she either broke free from his control or there was nothing left to possess. Another attempt to breathe, another failure.

He must've been a madman somewhere deep inside. He must have been fucking crazy.

I should've seen this coming.

It was her own damn fault, she realized. After all, in her own words on the napkin: "*I give you my full permission to do whatever the Hell you want to get rid of the evil spirit."*

And he wanted to make her fight for it.

"If you can overcome my possession, you can defeat that weaker one," Kyrett reminded Gress, as if he thought that would help her any.

Wait. He's left-handed. He's going to have trouble using my right hand, where I have better control of it. If I break his concentration, I'll have a moment to regain control—

"Nice try, but I can hear your every thought. Other than that, you'd get full marks on this one."

Damn, it is a test to you after all.

Gress, for once, felt absolutely, undeniably helpless.

You're going to fucking kill me, Kyrett. I can't do this and I'm going to fucking die.

A massive weight crashed through the door and collided with Gress' frozen body. Gress took in a painful amount of air and clutched her chest.

The feline form of Ross Bastet, sensing that her Classics teacher was in danger, rushed as quickly as she could to intervene.

Kyrett bolted upwards, now returned to his own body. "Ross! Don't kill me! I got carried away; I didn't really want to kill Ms. Rendal!"

The teacher tried to snap Ross out of her mysterious state. Yet, despite his words, he felt a pang of guilt when he realized he truly had intended to push Gress to her limit. "I overestimated her again. I guess she wasn't as strong as I hoped she was…"

Gress, her mind now far too exhausted to resist Draecyon's suggestion, fell quickly into an empty sleep on the cold floor.

"Ross, snap out of it, please."

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Arlot! I thought it was Draecyon! Did I interrupt something, or…"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," said Kyrett. "Full grades on your exam for my class if you never tell a soul what happened here."

"Your secret's safe with me," Ross confirmed.

Ross lifted Gress onto her bed, and then shifted out of her panther form.

"Can't sleep?" Kyrett asked Ross.

"Daemon's trying to put colored film over the lights so my daisy grows better. I appreciate it, but it's a little distracting."

"Maybe that one's not as bad as I thought. He's taking care of you, huh?"

"He's like a brother I never had! I hope we can stay in touch after this. I want to meet his sisters too! Also, we took some photos in the hotel that I can show Mom when we get the film developed back home."

"Oh, good. Well, if none of us can sleep, I'll schedule our check-out time for a little later in the morning tomorrow." Kyrett thanked Ross for her help and sent her on her way.

Once again, he entered a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER 11

Norris patiently waited for Gress. It was 9 AM.

She had already gone for a walk with Marlon, as he was allowed in the hotel due to being disguised as a service dog. She had even finished reading a pocket book she had brought with her.

All that was left was to finish applying her blue eyeshadow before Gress showed up. She unplugged the curling iron and cleaned the blue lenses of her silver glasses, and…

The clicking of high heels on hotel hallway tiling caused Norris' head to swiftly turn towards the door.

"Ah, Gress Rendal. It's good to see you could make it."

"Just get this over with. I didn't sleep last night," Gress lied.

Norris knew the difference. She could hear Gress' strained attempts to resist Kyrett's control during the early hours of the morning, followed by the silence of her passing out. Her map of energy told her, at that time, that a third body was in the room, likely that student Ross since the energy registered more as a plant's than a human soul.

Even though she knew the difference, she didn't want to jeopardize her chance to take down this woman. She had marked her off for a reason, after all.

Norris held her shaking hands beneath her white scarf and stepped closer to take a concerned glance at the mole-like mark.

"Marlon, dear, I'd ask that you'd please go to the lobby for now."

Norris let her dog out of the room.

"Now, we should begin soon. Please, I'd ask that you close the door. It looks like this is about to get dangerous, and I'd hate for it to impact anyone else in this lovely hotel. Don't you agree?"

"Sure. Whatever. Do whatever you want to get rid of it."

"Are you sure you won't regret those words?"

Norris shut the wooden door and locked it, making sure the small click was audible to Gress.

"Now, shall we make a proper introduction? My name is Quin Norris, a dragon hunter. It's truly nice to have gotten the chance to meet you, and I do hope you don't hold any of what's to come against me."

"Dragon hunter?" *She's after Rerell for sure. Is she trying to get into my good books so I'll lead her to my friend?*

"So you're aware of dragons, huh? I suppose you would be. I was hoping for your introduction, but I guess that isn't going to happen."

Norris grinned politely, took a deep breath, and stood, convulsing, in front of the locked door. Her body changed shape. Her breath was ragged.

Norris had, before Gress' eyes, become a dragon.

The creature's head nearly reached the ceiling. She was heavily built and rather stocky for a dragon. Her scales, rigid and black, lined her body like thick armor. Gress noted that the almost nonexistent wings on Norris' back were stout and oddly deformed.

So, if this dragon was built for defense and couldn't fly, Gress could only assume that she had to have some sort of strong ability.

And so she did. Scales suddenly pried themselves from those horrid wings, and Norris shifted back into her human body. They glowed with the crackling blue energy that Norris used to make her energy maps.

This woman was recreating her map with the scales, and the center of their focus, like the capital city on a real map, was the small spot below Gress' lip.

"I assure you that by the time I'm finished, that mark will be the least of your worries, my dear Gress Rendal."

Gress muttered a curse or two under her breath.

"Can't I get just one bloody break?"

"Not after you cursed me, my dear. I haven't been able to keep my hands from shaking for months. I'd say it's about time to correct that, wouldn't you say?"

"What the Hell are you getting on about?"

The scales, like a cannon focusing the room's energy, beamed brighter and emitted a low rumbling sound.

"You know what I'm talking about! Your energy says it!"

Gress raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"Draecyon!"

The energy pulsed through the net of scales, blacking out the room from the power it consumed. Norris shook her head, made a small "*tsk*" noise, and opened the hotel room's window.

"That's better. I'd like to see your face when you get what's been coming to you for months, my dear. I'd like to see your face when you die."

Gress' breath hitched at the words. Was it only now that she realized that she couldn't do a thing about her impending demise?

All around her, charged scales were frozen in the air. Would they crash forwards and impale her? Or would they simply transfer all the energy contained in them into her body at once?

Gress hissed something under her breath.

"What was that, my dear?"

"You better have a damn good reason for this."

Norris frowned and the energy quieted down.

"I don't need a *damn good* reason of my own. You've cursed me. You've tricked me. Now a good companion of mine has gone missing, my dear, and there is none other to blame but you, Draecyon."

Isn't Draecyon the name that Kyrett called my evil spirit?

Gress huffed, steadied herself, and stared at the point of the scale that was nearly touching her face.

"Hey. You're not the only one with a curse here."

Gress tried to buy some time for herself. How could she explain to Norris that she wasn't, in fact, Draecyon, but was simply possessed by her? Would Norris destroy her anyways if it meant destroying her enemy?

She didn't have Ross to save her now. She couldn't run back to her room and get Kyrett.

"My dear, if you knew just how many you have condemned, you would realize that this is nothing more than a little well-needed justice."

In an almost cruel level of nonchalant behavior, Norris leaned against the wall and propped herself onto the window ledge.

"It's an honor to be the one to deliver it."

The charges flashed and Gress collapsed.

Kyrett's tired eyes opened to an interesting sight that morning.

Across the room, the small camera that lay on the coffee table flickered to life. The film spat out of the front at an almost impossible rate, curling into wide wings and forming a wolf-like body. From the head of this beast, two trails of mane swept between the ears. Its legs were long but thick, and ended in a brush not unlike Draecyon's.

There was a creature that could build itself from inanimate objects.

Kyrett stood up and slowly approached this beast that stared down at him through two gaping holes in its regal head.

"I don't know who you are or why you're here, but I do know that you are the opposite of Draecyon. Your energies repel each other, if I am not mistaken."

The creature hissed.

"And I understand that if your antimatter-like energy were to contact any of Draecyon's vessels, you both would be destroyed, am I correct?"

The creature huffed, then paced impatiently around the room.

"But your energy isn't strong yet. You can stick objects together to build your body, but you can't force a single object alone to shift into the proper form."

The creature's cavernous eyes narrowed.

"Okay, okay! You need something, don't you? Look, I'm pretty exhausted from last night, so I can't do much, but as long as you're not looking for my old friend Draecyon, I'll help you!"

"That damn Draecyon is your friend?"

Kyrett was almost left speechless, but he tried to quickly regain his composure. "I don't believe that information concerns you if you do, indeed, wish for me to help you. Now, what is it that you need?"

"Damn it, can't you figure it out? I know you can sense the energy from across the hall with that useless silver heirloom of yours. Could you not be bothered to help?"

"Huh. You remind me of someone I know. How, may I ask, do you know this much about me?"

If holes in one's head could be rolled like eyes, the creature did just that.

"Shut up and go across the hall, would you?"

Kyrett frowned, pulled a white shirt loosely over his head, and buckled the closest belt in his suitcase which he hated wearing because it wasn't quite the right shade of brown for his liking.

Then he paused.

"If I go over there, into that concentrated energy and something happens to me, I want you to spare no expense or energy on contacting my sons, do you understand?"

"Damn it, Kyrett. I just want you to open the bloody door for me. Is that so difficult?"

Kyrett's face flushed suddenly.

"I'll, uh, be right over there."

Kyrett stared at the floor the whole way across the hall. "So, she accessed her power," he mumbled to himself. "But I can already tell that she won't remember this when she's no longer a dragon."

"Quit mumbling about me, Kyrett. Of course I accessed my power. You hit a damn switch on it last night or something, and now I'm about to die, so I guess I have to use it before I'm ready to."

"I never guessed you'd become the opposite of Draecyon, though."

"I had to, you idiot. It's the only way she can't possess me when I'm a dragon."

Gress swiftly turned around and shook her camera film wings in annoyance.

"What do you mean, Draecyon was your friend?"

"I may have brought her here from the future too…?"

"Damn you. You suck."

Kyrett frowned and covered his face by pretending to adjust his glasses with two fingers, though the creature with Gress' spirit knew that his glasses hadn't been sliding off of the ridge of his nose in the first place.

"What's with that face?"

"Nothing. It's just good to get back into an adventure every now and then."

"You're a sad, sad man, you know that?"

The words were flat, but the film beast's grin made Kyrett light up with a smile of his own. In fact, he seemed almost flustered when he put the master key (which Daemon swiped for him from the front desk at some point or another) into the lock at Norris' door.

"Oh, one second."

Kyrett took of his glasses and ran the thin fabric of his button-up shirt over the lenses, unbuttoned the top button so he could tuck the glasses over the collar, made sure the doorknob would turn, and then he kicked the door down.

"The doorknob stuck a bit more than I wanted it to."

Gress had to admire his way of doing things.

The film dragon was already flaking apart, casting empty photos around itself, but it charged into the hotel room and collided its body with the scales, shattering them and sending large electrical sparks through the air. In doing so, however, it lost most of its right flank.

"Damn it!" Gress hissed. Though there was no physical pain, it was like her spirit felt the loss of her right side. Instead of physical damage, she had lost mental energy.

Norris' eyes widened in horror. All she could do was to produce more scales and try to destroy the dragon.

That was, until she realized what she was fighting.

"The opposing force to Draecyon… I didn't realize it existed… this is impossible!"

Gress threw a horrible barrage of discarded film into Norris, breaking past the scales cannon and pushing the dragon hunter backwards. They circled Norris like a ward or perhaps a tornado, slashing at her with fine edges until the hunter signalled for mercy.

"What."

The scales fell. Norris sank to her knees and bowed at the creature's feet.

"Forgive me please, my dear." Norris sighed, feeling a deep wound to her pride and to her honor. "I was so focused on getting rid of Draecyon that I didn't realize your energy was on the opposite side of

the same signal. I was careless, my dear, and I was mistaken. Please, I ask that you forgive me, Daraegys."

Kyrett, knowing Gress had no idea what a Daraegys was, spoke up.

"Daraegys, the antimatter to Draecyon's matter, so called by how she is energy and does not have a dragon body of her own. Comes from the words *dragon* and *gray*, for the dark gray, maybe even black coat she possesses in her true form. Abilities historically include the ability to form inanimate objects into a body for herself and the power to absorb energies. Therefore, if your power was stronger, you would've been able to resist Miss Norris' scales."

Kyrett cleared his throat.

"Draecyon, the matter to Daraegys' antimatter, so called by her ability to copy bodies and material forms. Comes from *dragon* and *key*, key referring to the key to one's mind due to her possessive tendencies as a spirit. Her abilities to date include divination, possession or the influence of thoughts, and placing a variety of curses upon her victims. These curses, I'll mention, are usually connected to a physical object, as Draecyon's powers are tied to matter rather than energies."

"Thanks for clearing that up," Gress, or rather Daraegys, breathed. "It's not my place to question it and I don't care to know. Now. Norris. I suggest you get rid of the mark on my face and explain to me what's going on."

Still at Daraegys' feet, Norris glanced up and nodded.

"Please, please forgive me, my dear."

CHAPTER 12

The first thing that Norris did once she returned to an upright position was to use what pieces remained of her scales to try to dissolve the mark from Gress' face. Daraegys watched her human body in Norris' arms, and she decided she'd stay out of it for now.

"I'm sure it'll come off eventually," Norris said nervously.

"Don't tell me you can't remove it."

"My dear, it's not that I—"

"Cut the shit."

"Alright."

Kyrett had his own matters to address, as he looked closer at Norris. The woman was just too familiar, and her half-hearted attempts to disguise herself, if it was even that, didn't obscure her one bit.

"Sakura? Nurse Odile? I hope you don't mean to tell me you were holding a grudge against Gress the whole time. When was it? Since we came to this time? Since we started at the school? Before that? I thought you two always got along at work; do you mean to say this was not the case?"

Norris' eye twitched. She didn't anticipate Kyrett seeing her up close, let alone recognizing her with her hair down and different glasses on. "I can explain," she said, stalling. "I really did get along with Gress! Until that Draecyon got involved."

"Involved? Explain."

Norris paused. Her hands shook more than before, as if not wanting their owner to reveal why they were doing so.

"I… I ran into a woman at a small psychic shop. She looked rather much like you, except her hair was different, like Rerell said. At first I mistook her for you, but so unlike how you are at work, and now that I

think about it, she even acted more volatile. From what I've noticed, you're either perpetually pissed off or mildly annoyed, but this woman in the psychic shop was, shall I say, explosive and rather agitated by small things."

"Yes, yes," Daraegys muttered. *"I was there when she told you. You said you saw me that night."*

"I did. You utterly wrecked the library, my dear. When you pretended not to remember, I was certain that you were only pretending to not run a shop where you cursed people to avoid hurting Rerell's feelings."

"Pretended?!"

"Well, that was my misjudgment. Now that I know you're not Draecyon, we can put all of this behind us, right…?"

"You looked at this bloody mark on my face," Daraegys hissed. *"And you didn't do anything about it. You told me it wasn't malignant. Maybe it wasn't, but you are."*

"Well I couldn't just remove it then! How would I use it to track you?"

"And try to murder me."

Norris shifted uncomfortably. She glanced down at Gress' empty body.

"If it was, indeed, Draecyon that I was attacking, it wouldn't be murder. It would simply be exorcising a demon or slaying a dragon."

"Do I look like Draecyon to you?" The cavernous eyes narrowed again.

"Honestly, yes. Even your dragon form is similar to hers, if you wish me to be terribly honest," said Norris. Daraegys bristled her film in irritation. Norris brushed the scale dust from her black coat. "Pardon me. Daraegys, I deeply apologize for my rash and blinded actions."

"Sure you do. You're the worst."

Daraegys continued falling apart. Her power wasn't very strong yet, after only accessing it for all of a few hours. She didn't want to go back into her body just yet, however, because she knew she'd feel the pain from her exhausted spirit then. It didn't help that another perfect wound had appeared on the back of her left hand, right next to the first one that had appeared on her body.

Oh, wait. Kyrett said something about my powers historically. I've existed for a long time as Daraegys, haven't I? Maybe in a past life or

some crap like that. I don't care, as long as it keeps these lunatics from killing me.

It was Kyrett's turn to interrupt again. He paced nervously, not nearly so nervous as Norris, but certainly he had to feel rather responsible for not noticing just how many of his companions had it out for Gress because of Draecyon specifically. He was glad he didn't tell Gress that Draecyon was the group's favorite bride-to-be.

"Gress, Sakura, I'm sure there's plenty of time to work out your differences later. As I understand it, Sakura's curse is that trembling of hers, right?"

"Yes, my dear," said Norris.

"And Sakura, you should know that Gress is being possessed by Draecyon, but she's resisting it well. That's why you caught Draecyon's energy on Gress. Gress did nothing to you. Can we all get along now?"

"Don't act so reasonable, Kyrett. What were you saying earlier about an old friend…?"

Kyrett frowned. "We're not talking about that right now."

So they didn't. Daraegys' film body crumbled apart, Gress woke up confused and with a terrible headache, and when Norris realized that Gress remembered nothing since seeing the scales cannon, she doted on the teacher as if the premeditated murder plot had *totally* never happened.

"Oh, Gress! Thank goodness you're alright! Do you need anything? Anything at all?" Norris asked eagerly.

Gress held her head sorely. "Oh, that mark on my face. I'm here because you said you could remove it…"

"Of course, my dear! Although I may have bad news—"

"...but you were the one who put it there. At least buy me a concealer the next time we pass by a drug store."

"Ah, I was hoping you wouldn't remember that part. Truce?"

"Makeup first. Then truce."

CHAPTER 13

Teki's sleep schedule was erratic.

She slept briefly on the flight, she woke once or twice when Gress must've dozed off, and she had been asleep for the majority of the early morning into the day. It was only now that she was awake again, so she assumed Gress had been, thankfully, knocked out.

Teki had been noticing that she had less influence over Gress' actions recently rather than the large influence she used to have.

"Whatever. As long as we can get on the plane today, I shouldn't be worried about that one. She's not going to get herself killed when she's travelling with a crowd."

Clerski was already awake, so Teki didn't spare any silence as she rolled out of bed and tried on her wedding dress.

"Trying it on again? You're worried it won't fit, aren't you?"

"Of course not! I just… wanted to make sure it was the right one!"

"Ah, so you're wondering if James will like it, hm?" Clerski let her red glasses fall down over her face, caught around her neck by the lavender bead string. Teki couldn't help but notice that Clerski reeked of compassion, but somehow she didn't mind the saccharine display nearly so much anymore.

But she had to keep up her image!

"Of course he'll like it! It's just a dress. It doesn't matter at all."

"You really are thinking about that! I used to like someone once, you know. I know how this goes!"

"Oh? I should've guessed, I suppose." Teki grinned. "One of the men from your favorite library books?"

"In real life! I liked someone in real life!"

"What was that? They made a live action movie?"

"Of course not! I mean it, Teki!"

"Well… I bet you're gonna say that you tried to impress him, but no matter how you tried, it never worked, huh?"

Clerski sighed. Through Teki's personal stereo, she played a recording. It was muffled and broken from the years it had spent sitting in her mind.

"You're all dressed up, huh?"

This was one of Clerski's old friends. If it wasn't so muffled, Teki would have sworn she knew the voice well.

"So I suppose you're busy today. It's a shame. My friends all have a meeting tonight, so I was going to invite you to join me at that frozen yogurt shop in the west end of campus. But if you're busy with a date or something, oh? I didn't mean to make you flustered like that…"

"So, who was it? Did you accept? Tell me you went with him!"

Clerski liked seeing Teki acting less reserved and, if she had to be honest with her observations, less agitated.

"I… didn't. I got really shy and I told him that I was busy with a study group, so I, um, told him that I'd hang out with him another time."

"What kind of story is this?" Teki snapped, though it seemed more of a joke rather than anger.

"I'm trying to make you feel better about your love life, I guess! If it means that much to you, we're still close, we just didn't date…"

"You just had him on your mind because of all of this lovey-dovey stuff, didn't you?"

"No, no. That was so long ago! I actually have had a crush on another one of my coworkers too, but they didn't join us on this trip."

"So you told them your feelings, right?"

"Well, no…"

"In that case," Teki spoke quickly. "I guess my love life isn't so bad after all. Now that I feel better, it's easiest if I go to the front desk and ask if they have my car in the lot, isn't it? I'd think so. Wait for me here?"

"Of course," Clerski agreed.

Still in her wedding dress, Teki stormed down the hall towards the elevator and waited for it to open.

Teki allowed her mind to wander as she waited, and she realized that she hadn't even taken enough time to ask anyone where the hotel was. How had she been so distracted? She didn't know where in the world she was!

The doors opened and Teki directed the elevator to take her down into the lobby. As she stepped in to see no one else inside, she pressed the button for the door to close before anyone else could show up.

"Excuse me," a woman spoke, pushing the elevator doors open. The old elevator wasn't built to open if it sensed someone trying to stop the doors — was the girl pushing them with her own strength?

"Sorry," Teki mumbled.

It was about 11 o'clock in the morning. It was too late, by the time that the spirit had woken up, for her to go downstairs and get one of the free breakfasts that the hotel provided.

She turned to the young woman, only a student, probably eighteen, and also a tourist, if Teki guessed correctly.

"Are there any decent restaurants around here?" Teki asked.

"I was just wondering the same thing," the young woman sighed. "You can join me if you want when I check out the area."

"Well, I suppose I'll take you up on your offer."

The elevator chimed and the door opened to the lobby.

Teki and the tourist exited the elevator. The tourist paused to dig an inhaler from her bag, but then the two went on their way. "I can get my car from the parking lot," Teki suggested.

"There are a few places within walking distance, if I remember correctly," the tourist replied, adjusting the patchwork hood around her neck and twisting her dark hair over her shoulder. "Taking a car would be unnecessary on a nice day like this."

Teki took the tourist's offer and the two began to walk down the small street that diverted away from the hotel's parking lot.

"I forgot to introduce myself," Teki suddenly exclaimed.

"You're Teki, aren't you? Kyrett told me that we're going to your wedding. I hope I can be a good bridesmaid for you. I've never done it before."

"He... told you, huh?" Teki was on edge. If Kyrett mentioned the wedding to her, this student had to be the panther woman Ross Bastet,

the one that Kyrett had, what, connected to a flower as a last effort at life support? Teki didn't really want to see what the whole panther thing she saw through Gress was about close up, but Ross clearly wasn't dangerous, and Teki wanted the company.

Anyway, Ross seemed less skeptical than Gress, less unsettling than Norris, less crazy than Kyrett, and less flippant than Daemon. If she had to get stuck with one of them, Ross seemed like the best option. She needed good food either way, and Ross Bastet seemed to know what she was doing.

"There is a frozen yogurt shop on a side street. I need to stop in there to pick up something for Kyrett on the way back. He likes Greek yogurt, and apparently it comes in a frozen variety here."

"That's disgusting. He never changed one bit."

"Other than that, where we go or what we eat is up to you. I'm not picky, as long as there's a bit of sunlight and reasonable drink choices."

"That's fine by me," said Teki. "You have the same needs as a plant, right? That's a little weird, but whatever works for you."

It was only now that Teki noticed that Ross was carrying a single potted daisy in a terracotta planter.

It was only then that she noticed that the daisy was close to wilting.

Teki wondered if it would sound like she was too concerned if she went ahead and asked about it, so she took a bottle of water from her purse and poured it into the planter.

"You, ah, looked thirsty."

"Thank you, I'll pay you back for the water later."

"Forget it. It went warm anyways, so I wasn't going to drink it myself."

Teki started walking again, so Ross quickly caught up with her.

"Everyone's finished with the breakfast menu now, so it's no use looking for anywhere where I can get a simple egg sandwich. Maybe we can go for a burger somewhere. Is that okay?"

"Of course. It's up to you, after all!" Ross said.

"Oh, there's something I've been meaning to ask, you know."

Ross glanced up at Teki after taking off her patchwork hood and wrapping it around the terracotta pot.

"Where the Hell are we?"

Ross figured that this was a brief display of Teki's volatility that she was warned about. One moment she was calm, the next she seemed rather distressed.

"I'm not really sure either, actually. All I know is that there's an airport in the next city over so we shouldn't have to worry about getting to our destination from here," said Ross.

"Oh. Thank you. If we had more time, I suppose I'd want to go to any shops that are nearby but we do have to get onto the plane at one o'clock."

"I'm sure we have enough time! Anyways, you've been asleep for quite some time now, so you should use this time while you can."

Ross stepped to the right so the sun would hit her directly. Teki poured some more water into the terracotta pot absentmindedly.

Teki couldn't deny that she was glad to have a morning to spend with this student. This, she figured, was just what she needed to get her mind off of the wedding and her predicament as Draecyon.

It was a quarter past 11 when the two settled on a diner, where they ordered their food and found a picnic table in a nearby park. Because no one else was around, Ross had even shifted into her panther form, which almost startled Teki. The creature did look rather menacing with its glowing green eyes contrasting against her short dark fur.

What Teki was most curious about, however, was Ross' mask.

"You breathe through that thing?" Teki asked, sizing up the metal device that covered Ross' mouth and nose.

"I suppose it looks strange. I breathe though this because it filters enough air for me."

"And if it were to be removed...?"

"I'd wilt."

Those two words made Teki feel rather uncomfortable.

"But you don't wear it when you're not a cat."

"I believe I explained this to Gress recently, but I only need my inhaler then."

"You know I listen and watch through Gress?"

"I feel what the daisy does, so it's kinda similar, right?"

"I suppose it is," said Teki. "You're right."

Ross' strong arm outstretched and she glowed in a brilliant green light.

"You're using bloody photosynthesis, aren't you? Why did Kyrett choose a plant? Couldn't he have chosen something that wasn't so picky? Like a rock."

Ross pinned her ears back. Her thick tail flicked nervously like a whip.

"Nothing against you, or anything. I just wonder what the Hell goes through his head." Teki watered the plant again to try to make Ross feel better.

"Rocks can't breathe," Ross whispered. "Plants can."

"Sorry. Hey, let me take you shopping."

"Huh?"

Teki stood up and scanned her eyes over the brown leather hood with the black patch over each side, the black, detailed corset and the panther-like woman's brown loincloth. It all seemed to blend well into her black fur. Even her tail was dark brown.

"Your outfit. It's so dull. It's somewhat bothersome how you look like a shadow in this form. Anyway, your flower will dry out faster if you're overheating like that. Finish your food. We're going to a clothing store and getting something nicer for you."

Ross changed back into her human form. Her mask disappeared, and her outfit changed back to the white dress it usually appeared as. The only trace of her feline form left was her hooded cloak. Her cloak was too large for her now, so it hid her in a layer that Teki assumed could only be making the girl far too warm in the summer heat.

"Are you sure?"

"We have all morning, don't we? I'm thinking something sparkly and nice, and definitely no cloaks. You need something to wear as my bridesmaid, after all."

Ross knew it would be a long morning, but she was okay with that. Daemon had to be wondering why she hadn't returned yet. She could explain it later, but Teki was oddly *nice* for a supposed evil spirit, once one got past her harsh exterior.

Anyway, it had been such a long time since she had a day like this. As long as nothing happened to the plant, it would end up being a nice change from the usual.

CHAPTER 14

It was half past eleven.

Ross and Teki were on their way back from a small clothing shop nearby, where Teki had taken the liberty to buy a new outfit for Ross. Despite the warmth, Ross had taken to a black and gold formal dress, and Teki loved it on her so much that she just had to buy it for her, and bought her a pair of gold sistrum earrings to match. Teki herself bought a leather jacket in the same dark shade, contrasting heavily with her wedding dress except for the shearling collar. She flipped open a new pair of sunglasses and slid them onto her face.

"Hate to say it, but I'm getting tired all of a sudden," Teki complained. "You know how this goes. I'll rush back to my hotel room. You go find your friends."

Ross smiled and thanked Teki for spending the morning with her. Things had to go back to the way they were supposed to be soon; Teki would remain at Clerski's side, and Ross would rejoin Mr. Arlot, Ms. Rendal, Daemon, and Miss Norris. But she hoped she would be able to catch up with Teki again before the wedding, and she hoped there would be a way that both Ms. Rendal and Teki would stay safe on the journey.

Gress woke to the sound of the woman next door to her room slamming the door and flopping onto the bed. It was half past twelve.

Gress also woke to the feeling of something heavy on her back. She was lying on her stomach where Kyrett had brought her to her bed, but what could have been on top of her?

"Hello, down there."

Kyrett was kneeling over her, resting his weight on her lower back. She felt his long braid flop down, because it tickled her exposed back. *That bastard is changing my bloody bandages again!*

"It's been quite some time since I last changed them. Couldn't let them get too old."

"Couldn't you have done this earlier? When I was still comatose?"

"Pfft, comatose. You don't know what that is, my dear."

"*My dear?* Who are you? Norris— er, Nurse Odile?"

Gress suddenly noticed the hot feeling that spread across her face.

"And get off of me."

Kyrett frowned. "But the bandages…"

"Fine. Proceed."

Kyrett sat up, still on Gress' back, and turned his eyes towards the floor.

"How are you feeling after using your power this morning?"

"Power? What do you think I am?" Gress asked. She rolled her deep blue eyes. "Unless my power is a power-nap."

Kyrett couldn't bring himself to tell her that she had turned into the mythical Daraegys, so he weakly lied instead. "Power, did I say that? You got an electrical shock and it shorted out the *power*. It was strong and it's a wonder you're safe, you know."

Gress buried her head into her pillow. "Right. I remember, now."

That was also a lie. Gress didn't believe a word of Kyrett's excuse.

Kyrett continued to support his (rather light) weight by leaning over Gress while he finished unwrapping her old bandages. Gress shuddered when his hand ran swiftly yet firmly across her spine.

"It doesn't show any sign of getting better. Honestly, it reeks of dark magic and psychic energies, and it hardly looks like normal wounds anymore. It's like your curse is keeping them from healing too." Kyrett's left hand stopped as it swept upwards to meet Gress' neck, where the woman realized that something blocked him from tracing her spine farther.

"Ah, I'll move your necklace. Isn't it uncomfortable to sleep in?"

Gress didn't want to bring up taking turns with Teki again, so she nodded absently. "It really doesn't work anyway, but if I take it off I'll probably forget it in the hotel. I don't even know why I keep the thing. I don't want to make Clerski upset when we catch up to her again."

"Oh, carry on, then. I'll finish wrapping you up."

Kyrett sighed, tucked in the fresh bandages, and wiped his brow with his white sleeve. The air conditioner wasn't working, and the two teachers almost missed their frigid classrooms, especially on hot, humid days like this one. Kyrett stood up casually and walked to the right side of the room, grabbed a thinner white shirt, and changed into it. "Damn this air conditioner," he muttered with a grin as he tied his plain black tie.

He tossed a bag towards Gress.

"What is this? New clothes? Well, I suppose my uniform has been ruined already. Thank you."

Gress stepped into the hotel room's bathroom and changed into the oversized black mohair sweater (far too warm for the weather, but still better than the structured suit) and flared jeans that Kyrett gave her. She slipped on her high heels and a pair of leather driving gloves.

"Now, let's get on that plane. Call downstairs and tell the desk to contact Clerski, Daemon, and Nurse Odile."

CHAPTER 15

“You’ll be seated with Miss Norris, pardon, Sakura Odile. Is that okay, Ross?”

Rerell Clerski was organizing a seating arrangement for the group, trying to cater to those with motion sickness and to those who didn’t get along. While she wanted to keep the whole group together, she was carefully considering that Teki might not wish to sit near Gress’ group and vice versa.

“It’s fine by me,” Ross agreed.

“Actually,” Kyrett sighed as he addressed everyone in the lobby. “Ross and I will meet you there. I received a call from an associate of mine, and we need to make a stop on the way. If you ever need to contact us, Rerell can cast a message to me and I’ll find you guys, or you can find me on your way through. Here’s the address.”

Kyrett handed a slip of paper to Norris, who tucked it shakily into her scarf next to a blue kyanite stone.

“Thank you, my dear, and apologies for all the trouble. I wish you a good journey. We’ll see you when we see you.”

Kyrett turned to Daemon, who was finishing his goodbyes with Ross. “Mr. Ryers.”

“Huh? Oh, hey, Teach. Be safe on your trip, okay?”

“I’ll try my best. The weather will be good, at least, so we won’t have to land again. Now, you be safe too, okay? Don’t give this crowd any more to worry about. Take care of them.”

“O-of course, Teach. I understand.”

Kyrett turned towards Gress next. “And you, be careful too. I hate to have to leave at a time like this, so I wish you luck with your trip

and with defeating your evil spirit. I'm sure you'll be fine if I know you as well as I think I do."

"Hey." Gress smiled slightly. "I'll be waiting for you to join us again. Promise you'll keep yourself in good spirits."

"Y-you don't have to be worried about that, y'know! But… I might promise that if you promise the same?"

"Got it. Don't make me worry about you too much, or I'll have to come after you."

Kyrett didn't know whether that was a reassurance or a threat. He shuffled back behind Ross, mumbling something mostly incoherent except for the occasional remark about *that scary woman*, but he smiled nonetheless.

And so many temporary goodbyes were said, until…

"...Huh? Where's my pen from Moncton? Gress!"

The tall woman leaned against a nearby pillar and chewed on the brightly colored pen.

"Damn it! Give that back, would you?"

Gress threw the pen towards Kyrett casually. "Whatever, I was done with it."

Both Gress and Kyrett grinned, Kyrett's large and spreading across his face and Gress' simply an upturned corner of her lips.

"I'm gonna miss your crap," Kyrett sighed after a brief few seconds of silence. "Well, come on, Ross. We're going to make them miss their flight."

"Okay," Ross said. She didn't want to reveal that she still had one person left to say her goodbyes to, because she knew that to wait for Teki would be to wait until Gress fell asleep next. She knew that was something she just couldn't do.

The two turned around and departed.

"Let's… do a headcount," Norris suggested. "To make sure we have everyone who *will* be joining us."

Nobody else knew the reason behind that bitter remark besides Clerski, who understood that the nurse wanted more time to speak with Kyrett before he left. She, too, wished she would have shared some stories with him and got caught up on how he had been.

Norris' thin frown didn't disappear as she counted. "Rerell Clerski, Gress Rendal, and Daemon Ryers are here. Teki… pardon, I don't believe I know her last name."

"Teki, yes. Go on, keep talking," Gress grumbled.

"Sakura here likes to know everyone's full names," Clerski explained. "Probably from keeping her nursing records at the school."

Norris' frown grew.

"Please, if you could keep calling me Quin Norris. Please only call me Sakura at work."

"Your old nun name? Sister Quin? Alright," Clerski giggled.

"You promised not to tell anyone about that," said Norris. "And there's nothing wrong with wanting to know the names of those I associate with, Rerell my dear. Now, does anyone know where the soon-to-be Teki Gallen is?"

Gress frowned her own frown, one that was different from Norris' thin line of discontent. Her frown was small and it revealed that she knew the answer to the question.

"Care to share, Gress?"

"In her room. She fell asleep sideways on the bed this morning, so her head is dangling over the side of the bed."

How the fuck did I know that? I couldn't have seen when she fell asleep, could I? That would mean that there's now a brief moment of overlap when we are both awake at the same time…

"It's just a guess."

Norris' frown receded and it was replaced with a small but content grin. "In that case, how about we get her so we can be on our way?"

Without Kyrett, we need a different way to get both Teki and I onto the plane. We can't create any suspicion. Teki sounds rather short tempered, but I can't say I think she knows she's possessed. Cursed, sure, but if she was worried about that Draecyon sorceress possessing her, we wouldn't hear the end of it.

"Yeah. Come on."

If there is, in fact, a moment of overlap, we can use that moment to get onto the plane safely.

Norris exhaled sharply and walked with Gress to the elevator. "I suppose I shall lift her, my dear." Norris pushed her clear blue glasses

onto the bridge of her nose with her ring finger. Gress noted that they didn't distort the space in front of them, and she could see Norris' dark blue eyes as plainly as if she went without them, so they couldn't have had a prescription.

"You do that. What's with the glasses?"

"Oh, my dear, it allows me to see the energy field around us. We don't want to be intercepted by anything unexpected now, do we?"

Gress noticed that Norris was, once again, trying to be overly reserved and polite. It was uncanny. Nurse Odile was always normal, in a normal way, like normal people are. As Quin Norris, something about her was just too… *off.*

"Sure. You can drop the act, Norris. I know you're uncomfortable that I came with you. Look, I don't have any hard feelings towards you."

"My dear, this isn't an act. Yes, I'm uncomfortable, but certainly you don't expect that I'll drop my guard even when I'm not, do you? I just want to be of use to you!"

Gress sighed and hit the button for the elevator floor.

"What do you think of me, Gress?" pushed Norris.

"What—" Gress turned to look sharply at Norris. "What are you on about?"

"I know I doubted you, but I came around! Certainly that must make you at ease. What are you thinking?"

Gress rolled her eyes and folded her arms. She didn't intend to dignify Norris with an answer, but she had something to say on the matter, somehow.

"You remind me of Unferth."

"From *Beowulf?* The epic poem? I'm flattered, my dear!"

"That wasn't a compliment."

"Are you sure? I may be able to give you my Hrunting one day, so to speak."

"The only thing you're giving me is a headache," Gress said flatly. "Actually, I do need something from you, but it's not a sword. I need your *help*, Norris."

The nurse glanced up with brief confusion and tried to hide it by taking a piece of hair that fell between her eyes and twisted it back to

the side as if she was absentmindedly considering curling it again, but Gress knew the difference.

"Hey. *Quin*. You heard me right. I don't know if Daraegys will go crazy. You're the only one who has observed all of its patterns and movements, so I trust you to stop me if I do anything stupid."

Norris understood.

"So I was correct in noting that overlap." This time, it was Norris' turn to notice something about Gress. "Hey, I know that you won't do anything crazy. You're not stupid."

"Hmm?" Gress was confused. *Is Norris complimenting me? I can't tell if she's a sycophant or just sick in the head.*

"I mean… I won't let you do anything that could get us in trouble. I'm already paying for the hotel damages, you know."

"That's better. Now that I know you're back to normal, let's go in there and get the future bride."

Gress collapsed inside the elevator and Norris' silver cross necklace twisted into the form of a dragon, accompanied by whatever metal objects the woman had in her black and blue handbag.

"Damn you, Daraegys. You had better give that back when you're done. That necklace is important to me, okay? Just use the shit in my purse, my dear."

Norris realized, looking at Daraegys' gaping eyes, that she had made a mistake.

"I mean, good on you, my dear. Keep it as long as you need to!"

Daraegys knocked Teki's door open and Norris lifted her upon her shoulders.

"Don't wake her. I need to time the overlap properly and I don't know how many times I'll be capable of experiencing it."

A lot of struggling to match up the overlap later, everyone was seated nicely on the plane. Gress had her window seat next to Norris, Rerell was travelling a seat in front of her old friend, and Daemon was reunited with Teki, although the psychic ended up with the bad end of

the deal. She was still asleep, all thanks to Norris for waking Gress after she turned back from being Daraegys.

Gress still didn't remember anything about Daraegys other than what Kyrett and Norris had recounted over time.

Not that she was bothered by that fact. She was more focused on the silver cross that she had forgotten to return to Norris. She had the time to study it while the latter read a pocket sized book.

It's important to her, huh? Why is it engraved on the back with her death date? She didn't die. Maybe going back in time gave her more time to work with. Was she terminally ill or something? Is that what her shaking is, and not a curse at all? If she kept so much from us at work, what kind of person even is she anyway?

Gress shot a glance towards her travelling companion.

Why is a dragon a dragon hunter? Is it only to kill Draecyon? She's been close with Rerell forever, and she let me go when she knew I wasn't the one who cursed her.

"Gress. Why are you staring at me?"

"Nothing. I was wondering what book you were reading."

Norris grinned in a rather tranquil way. "Oh, it's just some old family records. Would you like to take a look?"

"Sure." *Anything to get my mind off of those questions. Maybe I'll even be told the answer.*

"Here we go, my dear." Norris handed over the book. Old and worn, it had copies of vital statistics papers tucked into each fold of pages. Gress skimmed it halfheartedly. Norris' whole family seemed to be dragon hunters.

"So that's why," Gress mumbled. "It's a family occupation."

"Family, yes… I suppose it is. But you see, my dear, I wasn't supposed to be born a dragon. I tried to keep it hidden! But that was so foolish. The leader of our community came to me for a meeting and… he introduced me to the hunter power… it was so blissful to feel that power, Gress. I don't know what I was thinking, but it was… a release! I told them everything, Gress!"

The woman with the tinted glasses grinned foolishly, as if she was reminiscing on this blissful feeling that the power of a dragon hunter had given her. Gress briskly nudged her to snap her out of it.

"Tch. Don't fall back into that."

Norris snatched the necklace back from Gress.

"This necklace freed me from his corrupt lessons that had been forced into me, metaphorically, of course. My dear, this necklace was left on the body of a young woman who was half dragon, half dragon hunter, who was killed while seeking refuge in a convent. The nuns put it on her to record the day it happened, so she could be sent home for a funeral. But our community wouldn't give a funeral to a dragon, for you see, it was a dragon hunter that killed her — had shot her with the hunting power nine times on the church grounds. It was terrible, Gress. But… despite that, I felt the wish from that girl to take the necklace and make sure it ended up with someone who she would consider her family."

"You took it from a dead body. So that's what the death date is about."

"Unfinished business, Gress. I'm searching for a dragon hunter to give it to so her spirit can rest."

I'm pretty sure you won't find any in this time.

"I must try. Don't you suppose it gets difficult for a spirit when it can't rest?"

"I think you should give this a rest. Give me one good reason I shouldn't switch seats with Clerski so she can listen to all this instead."

"We all need a good reason for anything, my dear. For me, to pass on the necklace when I find a dragon hunter. For you…?"

Hmph. I wish I had a good reason to be Daraegys. I'm only going to the wedding for self preservation, and I don't think Daraegys can even help with our evil spirit.

Norris looked at her book fondly, then gazed at the necklace. "I do think there is at least one of them out there. There has to be."

With the same tranquility in her face as there had been at the beginning of the flight, the bespectacled woman leaned on her hand and stared past Gress. The blue sky reflected in her lenses of the same color.

She's crazy, but she's crazy in a way she can live with. I sure can't say the same. Maybe she's less crazy than the rest of us.

However, and this fact troubled Gress, Norris' hands still shook fiercely. Gress could almost feel it herself, knowing that it was her own evil spirit that had caused it.

A good reason… to stop Draecyon from hurting more people, at least while she's using my body. My decision is final. Once we land, we're going to defeat that demon before the wedding.

Gress noted that Norris struggled to unclasp the hook on her cross necklace, so she reluctantly took it from the nurse and clipped it around Norris' pale neck.

"Ah, my dear. I really was having trouble with it. Thank you."

"Huh? Don't worry about it. I assume it's probably my fault she cursed you."

So it's a she? There's no way I should've been able to know that. I'm starting to piss myself off by figuring these things out with no logical explanation.

"This curse is not your fault, my dear. But, tell me, as you are cursed as well. Do these curses affect us, even when we're not in our physical bodies?"

"They must, by the way you're looking at the scratch on the necklace. Did I do that?" Gress inquired.

"Daraegys obtained one of those *perfect wounds* when we went to get Teki. It left the mark on the necklace since she used it as her… since *you* used it as *your* body."

Gress looked at the silver charm closer. "You're right. Why did you ask?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear. I was just wondering."

Norris turned back towards the airplane window and Gress absentmindedly dug through the pockets of the flared jeans that Kyrett had given her. She conveniently found a pen cap that she could chew, probably left there intentionally by Kyrett to give her something to occupy her time with on the plane.

"Hm. I would've preferred an entire pen, but this will have to suit."

CHAPTER 16

Norris didn’t know if she was allowed to stand up on a plane. After all, she had only been on a plane once, when her family moved to her old community when she was still young.

However, like the rest of the crew, who were also inexperienced with air travel, she had more than a few major questions. But like the rest of the crew, she didn’t want to voice them.

“Excuse me,” she asked at one point to a passing flight attendant. The attendant kept walking. “Excuse me, am I allowed to leave my seat to speak with other passengers?”

Norris didn’t get an answer.

“Ah…” Norris sighed. “Marlon, what do you think?”

The hound stared up at his owner. He didn’t have an answer, either.

“It’s okay. I haven’t pinpointed her location, anyways.”

From what she was saying, Gress figured that Norris probably sensed someone from her family.

“Oh, so you’ve figured it out, Rendal?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing, my dear. I suppose you don’t know, either. Am I allowed to exit my seat during a flight?”

“This is a ridiculous conversation that I’m having with someone who tried to murder me so recently.”

“Now, now, Gress my dear. I’m sure you said something about no hard feelings? I’m sure you just don’t want to admit to not knowing? Or does air sickness put you in a bad mood?”

“Damn you. Both are correct.”

"Ah. Fair enough. I'll try to locate the source of the energy from here."

"Go ahead."

Norris glanced around, trying to pinpoint the source of the energy she felt. If Gress didn't know if she was allowed to get up, and she didn't know where the person was, she wondered how difficult it would be to find them.

"I'll ask now to make it easier," Gress said. "How is this relative related to you?"

Norris paused for a moment. "I don't know. She could be related by blood, or she could be part of the ‘family’ through the hunter power. Either way, she's a dragon hunter. She doesn't have dragon blood, unlike the girl that the necklace came from, though. That's all I know."

"I'll keep an eye out for someone who looks like she'll try to hunt us," Gress mused. "Other than that, I'm afraid I can't help."

Gress went back to chewing her pen cap, keeping one eye open and closing the other. Norris figured Gress wouldn't be of much help to her.

She also figured that she had to find the woman that she needed to find soon, or else she'd lose track of the other dragon hunter by the time the plane landed.

"Marlon. Do dragon hunters have different scents than humans?"

The dog glanced up and yawned. Then he sniffed around, sniffed the necklace, and padded across the floor towards a passenger who sat three seats ahead of Norris, to her right and at the seat closest to the aisle.

The dragon hunter was tall and rather muscular, with short black hair that framed her dark face. She seemed to have been on her way to a meeting due to the fact that she was dressed in a suit. She didn't look like one would imagine a dragon hunter would, except for her gloves, which upon a careful look from Norris, were determined to be made from dragon scales.

Norris focused her powers to place a mark slightly below the hunter's left eye.

The hunter turned around and cast a steely glare around the plane. In a deep, monotonous voice, she called the flight attendants. "Excuse me, but this mutt is bothering me. Please remove it."

"Oh, my dear, Marlon seems to have gotten loose again. Does anyone see him? I'm sure I felt him beside me only a minute ago."

The hunter's glare locked onto Norris.

"Pardon this incident, Miss Izoin. This support dog must've been looking for something of his owner's," the attendant apologized. "I'll return him to Miss Norris immediately."

"Keep him away from me. I don't like hunting dogs."

Norris froze.

She decided to pretend she had no idea what this Izoin woman was talking about. "Hunting dog? My dear, Marlon can't keep track of where I am. How would he be able to hunt animals?"

Izoin huffed and turned around as Marlon was taken back to Norris.

"Hey."

The last voice Norris expected to hear at her defense snapped at Izoin and the attendant.

"Hey. Marlon was looking for my pen. I only have the cap so I went behind Norris' back to send him after the pen that I had dropped. Are you going to let him continue, or will you get down to search the floor by yourselves?" Gress' voice didn't waver. She sounded dead serious.

Izoin scowled. "Just keep that mutt away from me."

"So you want the attendants to collect my pen for me? Or do you wish to do it yourself?"

At this point, Clerski's attention had been pulled to the exchange. She pulled a pen from her purse and dropped it onto the floor. She knew that if the pen was found, Gress' excuse would be believable. She didn't know why she wanted to help so badly, certainly believing from the small amount she heard that Norris and Gress were just bickering again somehow. She knew, however, that she sensed that something wasn't quite right with Izoin.

Norris waited for Gress and Clerski to finish. They were drawing too much attention for her liking. She knew that her chances of convincing Miss Izoin that these dragons would be her friends had long been gone.

She knew she was going to have to force Izoin to speak with her regarding the necklace.

"Norris," Daemon addressed from behind the woman. "Do you think they're going too far? I hope they don't cause trouble, you know, because I'm starting to get worried about the wedding. We haven't been in contact with James for a while and I don't know if we'll be there on time."

Norris tried to ignore him and resisted the urge to sigh. She had seen many surprises in the last 24 hours, but Daemon being serious was the most unexpected. She had to remind herself that Daemon wasn't on the journey to defeat Gress' spirit or remove the curses that each of the three dragons had. He was there to make sure that nobody compromised the wedding.

That, at least, explained why he hadn't gotten involved with anything at the hotel and had gone to the bar and impulse-bought gardening lights the night before instead of sticking around to hear Kyrett's and Gress' racket.

"Norris. Please, I need something from you."

"Go ahead, my dear, but please don't draw that hunter's attention this way."

"I need you to promise that when we get off of this flight, you will all with Teki. I will handle Gress alone until we meet up with Kyrett again. If you choose to go after Miss Izoin, you can't allow it to interfere with Teki's or Gress' trip."

Norris stared at Daemon quizzically from behind her blue lenses.

"Daemon, my dear. I'm afraid I must give this necklace to Miss Izoin, whether she wants it or not. It is, how should I say it? Unfinished business with my family. Excluding that, I miss my dear friend Rerell, as your pet bride has kept her to herself the whole journey so far. We will be on our way to the address that Kyrett gave us until we catch her. I promise you will catch up with us on the way, so please go with Teki, and tell her where to find us, too."

Daemon frowned. "Oh, all right. I'm sure Teki can handle travelling on her own. I'm staying with you all so you don't derail Gress. Here's Gress' car keys, so be sure to hand them back to her."

"Very well. I cannot stop you."

Norris was uncomfortable for the rest of the flight. She tried to stare past Gress' head to see the view out the window, but she couldn't stop

thinking about Daemon's request and Izoin's glare. Even Marlon seemed to notice that she wasn't feeling quite like she usually did, but no one mentioned it. She hated her uneasy feeling. She figured it was the feeling that everyone got when they were in a difficult situation and didn't have a stronger power to surrender to.

Gress spent the flight, after getting Clerski's pen back, trying to fight her evil spirit's control. Although Kyrett was not there to teach her, that was rather for the best. Another near-death experience wasn't in her travel plans.

She still didn't notice that her spirit was Teki, who slept not far from her.

She did notice, however, that her perfect wounds only appeared whenever anyone nearby sustained a similar injury. The man in the next row over got a papercut. Gress was wounded across her hand. The woman two rows in front of that man hit her knee on the seat in front of her. Gress ended up with a cut across her leg.

These wounds also crumbled more striations from the tourmaline stone around her neck. Each time it was damaged, so was she. She wondered if the stone was taking much of the hit for her. She didn't know it was the thing that was turning wounds to itself or others into wounds on Gress.

Those wounds made it difficult for her to concentrate on resisting the spirit's control.

Daemon wondered, after observing Gress as she experimented with this new discovery, if she realized that the curse came from the stone. He wondered if Gress knew that Teki planned to betray them the day after the wedding.

He wondered if she knew that he was already betraying them.

Clerski spent the rest of the flight trying to piece together the events of the last few days. She didn't expect that she would be cursed with bad luck after obtaining a crystal to help with luck, she didn't expect to been convinced by a psychic to join her for a wedding, and she certainly didn't expect that she'd end up reuniting with her old friends and her old professor so closely to defeat *another* evil spirit.

She didn't want to defeat Teki. It seemed that not even Kyrett cared what would happen when she was defeated, but she knew that Ross

was unaware the spirit was the bride, Gress was equally unaware, and Norris was too distracted with some strange sidequest which had not been too pressing until her hands started shaking at work. (It was then that Clerski realized Norris, too, had been cursed).

As for what she knew about Daemon, she was fully aware that he knew that Teki was connected to Gress, and not just by some simple tethering. He knew she was outright trying to possess her to keep her from causing trouble.

She was about to cause a whole lot more.

Gress, herself, had finally thought enough about the timing of everyone's curses, and she came to the conclusion that it was, in fact, the stones. Her own black tourmaline, for protection, did the opposite of protect. It wounded her. Clerski's aventurine, for luck, granted misfortune. Norris' blue kyanite, for steadiness, forced her hands to shake uncontrollably.

Gress reached behind her neck to unhook the clasp of the velvet ribbon that held her stone to her neck. Her arms locked up. She couldn't move them any farther.

That damn Draecyon. She won't let me take it off!

She lowered her hands.

Gress' eyes darkened as she retrieved a letter opener from the pocket of her jeans — Kyrett's letter opener from the night before, which she had stolen desperately in case she needed to defend herself from him again — and drove it sharply into the stone.

Despite her velocity, Gress' hands stopped again. The tip of the letter opener rested just a millimeter from the stone's surface.

One more try.

She closed her eyes this time, in case it was her own self-preservation instinct that prevented her from splitting the stone, knowing it would damn well tear her to shreds.

No, her hands stopped themselves again. *Draecyon* stopped her hands again.

"Hey, Norris," Gress addressed. "Fuck you."

Norris looked at Gress, bewildered, her eyes widening behind her glasses. "My dear…! I thought we were coming to an understanding, or…"

Gress breathed a quick breath through her nose, roughly. She tilted her head up and rolled it back a bit. “Doesn’t that piss you off? Fuck you. I hate your guts.”

“What do I have to do to prove—”

“Doesn’t it make you want to do something about it? I hate you. Of everyone I could have been seated next to on this flight, you’re the worst. You’re cowardly and you only suck up to people because you know that in every way, you’re outclassed. We should have left you at the hotel.”

Norris’ countenance shifted in offence and hurt. “I understand I went rather overboard, and I’m terribly sorry I can’t remove the mark on your face, but I—”

“Shut the fuck up or shut me up!”

“...! My dear!” Norris, still bewildered, shifted just her arm into a dragon’s limb and stripped the scales from it for a small cannon in her trembling hands. “You’re letting that demon speak through you, or you’ve gone mad.”

“Neither. So shut me up yourself or we’re leaving you at our next stop.”

By this point, Clerski tried to intervene, and Daemon assessed whether or not this was just a travel argument or whether he had to step in to keep Gress focused on the journey. Having more attention on her than was safe for Gress’ own plan, she sighed, stood up, and pulled Norris to her feet by her long white scarf.

Norris released the small cannon of scales. It tunneled through the close space between the two and pointed directly at the mark on Gress’ face. Gress waited for the half second it took to strike her, and she moved her head so the tourmaline stone was in the cannon’s path instead.

It struck with a flash of blue electricity. Gress closed her eyes. As the top of the stone shattered in the impact, a horrible wound burst open on her head. In the moment of the impact, she reached behind her neck and unclasped the ribbon around her neck.

Blood spurted out of her and poured down her face.

Passengers panicked and fled their seats. Clerski came to Norris’ side, and Daemon tried to pull Gress away.

"That's enough, Gress," said Daemon. She shoved him from her arm. "Put that back on. I don't know how you removed it, but it's important for the wedding."

Gress spat out blood that poured into her mouth. "Damn you," she hissed coldly.

She was only trying to emulate the freedom she gained from Kyrett when Ross found the two training. She didn't expect Daemon would let so much slip just by trying to intervene.

She decided, as she threw up blood onto the plane seats, that she should have known Daemon was bad news. That the stone was bad news.

I got this curse after he came to my house in the middle of the night. Of course it's connected.

So it was a curse from Daemon? *No, it was a curse* delivered *by Daemon.*

Daemon was an assistant to the evil spirit.

Daemon was an assistant to Teki.

Teki, by that logic, had to be the evil spirit. Gress had finally figured it out, and all it took was causing a scene on an airplane, not to mention retching her own blood.

"Going to the wedding of my own evil spirit," Gress announced absentmindedly, the blood loss getting to her head. "Norris. Sorry. Clerski. The stone, get rid of—" Gress stumbled. Daemon sat her down.

Clerski and Norris rushed to Gress' side and tried to stabilize her. Daemon did no such thing; instead he woke Teki forcefully.

Training for overlap or not, Gress was in no state to resist the blackouts when Teki was awake.

She lost control of her thoughts and spiralled into sleep.

CHAPTER 17

Just when everyone thought they knew what they were going to do when the plane landed, an unexpected twist threw them off track. In the airport, Miss Izoin confronted Teki.

"You have an address, don't you?"

"Don't ask me. I've been left out of everything ever since I returned to the hotel this morning!" Teki glanced at her watch, hoping to get out of the airport before she could be roped into anything. Unfortunately, the room was so full that getting out of the building would be an issue.

Izoin glared at Teki, who gave a small *hmph!* in response.

"Judging by your dress, you're getting married."

"Well, that's obvious!"

"You're getting married so you can free yourself from your connections to the mortals whose bodies you copy to create your own."

Teki realized the implications of what Izoin had suggested. To know that, it meant she was either closely acquainted with an evil spirit or she was one herself. *Maybe this one would marry someone simply to free herself, but that's not the only reason I accepted James' proposal. This woman is crazy.*

"I'm getting married because he proposed to me." She flashed her engagement ring. Teki folded her arms across her chest to further enforce the stubbornness behind her words.

I want one single normal person. That's all I need on this trip. Yet, everyone I find is either a dragon or they have some sort of detestable ability. I'll have to get rid of their powers anyways, but it seems that the more I travel, the more strange people I have to deal with.

"Are you listening? I said, you're going to give me the address to where Kyrett Arlot is staying," Izoin snapped. She scowled at the headstrong bride-to-be.

"Get it yourself. He used to be a friend of mine, so like Hell I'm going to let a bitch like you find him."

"We used to be closer than friends. Tell me where he went."

Izoin looked threatening even under the bright airport lights. Her hazel eyes were in a permanent scowl, and the short black hair that framed her face made her look rather mature. Teki had to admit that she was also rather well-built, a fact that was established further when the woman removed her blazer and Teki saw the black tank top beneath— it was tight and made a small display of Izoin's toned abdomen.

It wasn't natural for her to have looked so stunning and strong, and Teki knew that Izoin had built that body for herself using her evil spirit abilities.

I'm glad James met me before he could get the chance to meet her.

"I don't have the address," Teki stated again. She wasn't lying. She had been a victim of her own connection to Gress when the address was given to someone or another from the group. She had been asleep.

"Demons like you are so weak. You're bound to your little humans so much that you won't allow the mortal's friends to be hurt," Izoin chided.

"I told you," said Teki. I have nothing you want. I have a wedding to get to, so piss off and let me get to it!"

Izoin sneered without a word.

"Teki! Help, she captured me!"

Teki froze. That was James' voice. There was no way that James was in that airport... was there?

"Follow her or she'll torture me! Bring her to that teacher, please!"

Teki didn't know it, but Izoin had three abilities, just like she had. Number one was to possess people, an ability shared by both spirits. Number two was to cast voices into the target's head, usually of something they feared (Teki, instead, could turn into Draecyon physically). Number three, where Teki could use divination powers, Izoin could change how the eyes perceived an object, making

something look like something different without ever having to change its structure.

Izoin was using power number two right now. James was not in the airport. His voice was simply being cast into Teki's head.

Teki was not a strong demon, as far as standards went, so she was unaware of this power and lacked the ability to recognize it as just that— power.

If she had known, she could've blocked out the voices or conveniently sent them into Gress' head to infiltrate her dreams and send a signal of distress. But, as Teki was not a strong demon, and she didn't know that Izoin hadn't captured James, she didn't do that. Instead, she gave in to Izoin's will and agreed to find Kyrett for the stronger spirit.

Izoin wrapped a chain around Teki's wrists and led her out of the airport. Even then, Teki, who had never truly felt threatened in her life, feared for her safety. This problem couldn't be solved by keeping within a certain distance of a human, and Izoin's energy told Teki that she was the strongest evil spirit there was besides the Devil himself.

Not even an old encounter with Beta had made her fear this much.

Teki had been defeated before her wedding began. If she didn't make it to the event, she would be bound to Gress. If she stayed bound to Gress, Izoin could kill both of them by forcing Teki to stay away from the teacher or by slaying either Draecyon or Daraegys. *Why does she want me out of the way? What does she want with Kyrett? How did she find James? How did she know about any of this?!*

With no other option until she was alone with Izoin and she was sure James would be safe, Teki followed Izoin's orders, but she didn't hold back a single helpless tear.

Is this how they feel? Daemon's new friends, the ones that I have been silently cursing this whole time? Do they also feel like cornered animals? They're aware that they're only spared from the full powers of the stones because I need them alive for my wedding. Is this the same feeling that I have been giving to everyone whose powers I have destroyed in my pursuit of a world without magical abilities?

She briskly wiped her tear away with her shoulder.

No, it's people like Izoin that prove to me that powers must not be allowed to exist in this world. She doesn't even have to use them and yet I feel threatened by her just knowing she is so strong. Influential people, those who reign with terror, and those with charisma all have these types of powers somewhere. People like Izoin tell me that this is not a good thing.

Teki still could turn into Draecyon when she knew it wouldn't draw attention. She had to convince herself that she could save James by eliminating Izoin and her power.

"Take that car of yours," Izoin spat. "It'll be faster."

"I don't have the keys," Teki muttered, trying to keep her voice steady. "I can't drive you there without them."

"I know how car keys work," Izoin hissed in a dry voice. "Pick the damn lock. I know you've watched that Daemon friend of yours do it, so you should be able to start your car without the keys."

As she leaned down to unlock her door, Teki thought, *maybe I can send a signal to Gress in a dream. She's been blocking me recently when she has been awake, but with those new injuries of hers, she should no longer have a strong mental block.*

Teki focused on Izoin's face. She focused on the dark energies that the demon released. She focused on the chain around her wrists and the car, and the feeling of being threatened. She focused on James' voice. Finally, she focused on a feeling of her connection with Gress, and as if sending a desperate cry for help, she drew from each memory she had of Gress' past self as Daraegys, long before Gress was Gress. *Daraegys, I know you are destined to oppose me, but I need your help! Gress!*

With her mental energy depleted from all the focusing she had done, Teki opened the door to the car, started the engine, and in a dull voice, asked, "I don't know where Kyrett is, so would you at least tell me which way to drive?"

From within her realm of sleep, Gress opened her eyes. She wasn't awake, but she wasn't in a dream. Maybe, she figured, it was the lucid dreaming crap that Clerski had told her about sometime earlier in the year.

Either way, she couldn't move, but she could see everything around her.

One of the things she saw was that Draecyon stood before her. She had never seen Draecyon up close before, but she had taught about her in Classics class, as well as she knew that Draecyon was her own evil spirit.

The next thing she noticed was that her body was covered in a thin layer of frost.

According to a textbook in my classroom, Daraegys used to live on a snowy mountain after she was banished there by Draecyon. It was a hollow mountain with many chambers, but the most notable one was the chamber where the frozen husk of Daraegys lies. Her ability was to keep things she touched from breaking, but when she touched the snow, it could no longer be melted and it collected on her body, freezing the soulless husk forever while the soul moved on to its next incarnation.

Gress realized that Draecyon was sending a message directly to her very soul itself.

"Daraegys. We cannot touch. Our energies may not collide. Yet, it seems we have formed a connection through my powers— powers which should not exist, yet they do."

Draecyon's split mane arched behind her head, then curled to resemble the large horns of a ram. There was something unsettling about the human-like way that the creature's white jaw moved when she spoke. Gress couldn't deny it, she was intimidated at the sight of the creature that had possessed and cursed her.

"Daraegys," Draecyon spoke again, as if she thought the message wouldn't get through if it wasn't directly addressed to Gress. "My powers have caused you trouble and I intended to eliminate you. Powers must not be allowed to exist and now that you have developed them, I must see to the fact that they will not become dangerous."

You cursed me before I became the film dragon that Kyrett told me about. You sensed that energy inside me, even then. I guess I have to respect that, even just a little, because you knew me better than I know myself.

"Daraegys. The woman Teki, as you have figured out, is my identity in this life. You predicted everything correctly. If I wed James, I will be free from you but you will disintegrate. If I do not, we will still be bound and we will have to stay in the same range and avoid destroying the other. You may not believe this, but I truly love James. I will not give up on this wedding."

I know you love him. Why do you think I haven't turned back yet? I could wipe us both out by getting on a plane while you sleep and breaking the radius. The result will be the same for me either way. Hmph. Do you really think I expected you to use him for money and freedom? That would be ridiculous.

"Daraegys. I'm glad you understand. I need your help one more time. It seems you wish to attend the wedding, and I am afraid that even before this predicament, you will only be able to see it if you can train your control of our overlap time, the time in which we are both awake."

I'm aware of that. I'm up to 30 seconds of overlap and you haven't realized it. What's this about a predicament?

Draecyon's dark body no longer stood proudly with its chest puffed out and its brush-like feet firmly planted in midair. Now it lowered its head as if begging for help and forgiveness.

"Daraegys! James has been captured! I'm on the way to find Kyrett! It's that woman's fault! That wicked Izoin!"

Gress stared at the desperate creature.

"Daraegys! You have to defeat her for me, I can't do a thing! She'll hurt James, she'll possess Kyrett, she'll destroy my new friend Ross! Daraegys!"

Gress wanted to physically speak, to physically confirm to Teki that she would, like she had promised many days ago, do anything in her power to make sure that the wedding ran perfectly. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak. Her mind's own voice seemed unlike her own to her, kept just out of reach to promise something she didn't know she could.

"Gress!"

She took a deep breath, though it was no use in a dream.

I'll put an end to this, Teki.

And for a moment, merely a brief moment, Gress' eyes fluttered open as if she was experiencing the overlap.

A single second of overlap when Teki was in the middle of her waking hours. It was only one second, maybe less than that, but if Gress had time to consider it, she would've thought that it was at least a sign that she could control the overlap in her sleep.

That second would possibly be her key to saving the wedding.

CHAPTER 18

The black sports car twisted through a path that led through the forest. Teki couldn't be sure where she was or if she was technically on a road, but she knew that she was on her way to wherever Kyrett was. She knew the way simply because she had checked her crystal ball for directions.

Gress still hadn't shown up to save her.

The narrow road, only wide enough for one vehicle, passed through a dense group of trees until Teki no longer knew where she was going. In actuality, the path was meant to be a walking trail that was not meant for people to drive though. That could have been used to explain why the farther Teki drove, the worse the road got.

Teki planned to find the nearest cliff or lake and take a detour. In fact, she had just angled her car towards a river when her passenger tapped her long nails on the dashboard.

"Hey. You're going off of the path," Izoin pointed out. "Don't even consider driving us into the water. If I'm not back by a certain time, my servants will know that you disposed of me and they'll have permission to do whatever they wish with James, Ross, and Kyrett."

That's a lie. She didn't even know what time she'd find me in the airport or when the flight would land. Anything related to timing would have to take into account those factors in case she ran an hour late, and if her people were to hurt James too early, Izoin would have nothing for leverage, Teki thought.

Yet, out of a small hint of doubt due to just how ambitious Izoin was, Teki drove back onto the path.

She wished she'd just get lost in the dense forest and no one would ever find either of the evil spirits again. *That'd be nice. I can live for*

twenty years among the pine and cedar trees and then I can return to marry James. Even better, the cops should catch us for driving on a walking path and we'll both be imprisoned. What a nice idea.

Teki hit the gas pedal and sped through the path quicker than she had before.

She continued driving for an hour without stopping. She vaguely remembered being there before; to meet one of Kyrett's friends a long time ago, and when she got to the house she immediately knew why he was there.

"Go in there and get him. Grab the cat, too."

Teki stepped out of the car and walked down a narrow pathway to the dilapidated house. There was a greenhouse on the back of the property, but other than that, Teki wasn't sure if the house was stable.

Her wedding dress got tangled in the brambles that lay close to the ground, but Teki walked on as if she didn't notice or care about the now damaged train of fabric that she was supposed to wear for the groom. Her eyes were locked in a stare towards the path in front of her, and she wanted nothing more than to get to the door and rescue James. Then, and only then, could she allow herself to make a mistake or make Izoin angry.

If only, she wished, if only she could've been a normal bride.

Without warning, as soon as the door was opened, Izoin struck Teki in the head and the black-haired woman collapsed to the wooden floorboards. Teki was knocked out immediately, but as she went down, she knew that James was not in the small house like Izoin said he was. She had been tricked, and now she was going to be disposed of now that she had lost her purpose to the other demon.

Gress woke up forcefully. She had a pounding headache.

"Daemon. Pull over."

Daemon glanced at Gress. His eyes held a glimmer of compassion, but he frowned and turned back towards the road ahead. "Sorry, Gress. It needs to be done. Teki must've gone to do something last minute,

but once we meet up at James' place, we have to start the wedding. There's no other option."

"How about saving the bloody bride-to-be? That sounds like a good option."

Daemon's eyes went dark and he exhaled forcefully.

"Save? So, she was kidnapped in the airport? However unlikely that is, it must've happened then. I was with her until she left, but by the time I left the airport, her car was gone."

Gress glanced back at Daemon.

"Pull over. You've been drinking."

Daemon twisted the blue sports car back into the parking lot and stepped out of the vehicle. He switched seats with an annoyed and preoccupied Gress.

"I know who has her," Gress said once she was back in the driver's seat. "It's that demon woman Izoin. I don't think she's a dragon hunter, after all. Where are Norris and Rerell? They can lead us to her easily."

"They're already going after her. Miss Clerski thinks she might actually be— look out!"

Another vehicle swayed into the wrong lane.

"Stay in your own lane," Gress growled, adapting her speed and angle to avoid the oncoming car. As quickly as she had changed her trajectory, it was back on track again and she continued on the road, cursing out the other driver.

The sun was going down. Gress kept driving, even when Daemon watched her intently, nearly staring a hole in her head.

"What?" Gress tilted her sunglasses down to make eye contact, hoping the unusually quiet Daemon would say something.

"You haven't confronted me on the stones yet. I thought you'd confront me once you figured it out."

"I'll do that after the wedding, thanks."

"Gress, you know that you won't live if they get married. You'll disintegrate and die."

"Don't count on that, Daemon."

Gress didn't know how she'd avoid that situation when the time came. She hadn't found the time to figure it out, especially after only

learning so recently that Teki was her demon. Yet, in usual fashion, she wasn't going to allow herself to go down so easily.

"What if," she started. "What if I got married, too?"

"Are you crazy? The wedding is in two days. You can't find a husband in two days!"

"So it *would* work."

Daemon was silent. Gress continued.

"If a wedding prevents her from dying when I die, it could prevent me from dying, too. Judging from the logic behind an evil spirit's connection being broken by marriage, the power wouldn't affect me if I was married when the connection was broken."

"Gress, you can't get married in just two days."

"Then I can become a nun."

Both of them were silent now, the only sounds being the car's tires on the pavement and the hum of the car's motor.

"I'm not becoming a nun," Gress decided after a moment of thought. "I'll find a way to live, though, even if I can't get married in such a short amount of time."

Gress stepped on the gas pedal harder and the car picked up speed again. She tried to concentrate on the road, though her head was flooded with thoughts such as *I should've figured it out sooner* and *I can't stop the wedding, but what else can I do?* She tried to shake the thoughts from her head. She gave up after a few minutes.

She found it difficult to be mad at Daemon, despite how he had cursed her in an effort to kill her so Teki could move on to another body, and despite how he had desperately tried to fix it without removing the curse once he had found out that Teki needed to stay in her mortal body for a little while longer.

She found it difficult to be mad at him because, while he acted like she didn't matter to him, Gress knew that Daemon cared at least a little for her wellbeing. At least, he cared enough that his eyes clouded over whenever he thought about his actions and what kind of situation he had forced her into.

He cared so much that he wouldn't make eye contact with her when he knew she was two days away from death.

He cared so much that she could tell that he didn't want to oppose her or argue with her, because he didn't want it to end that way.

He cared so much that, against his better judgement, he sighed and said, "If I think of a way to help you, I might just do you a favor."

CHAPTER 19

By the time Gress had reached the small house in the woods, it was empty except for Rerell Clerski and a few pieces of broken furniture. Despite the fact that Kyrett had shown her photos of Clerski's dragon form, she almost didn't recognize the white feathery dragon at first.

Gress stepped through the collapsing doorway and avoided the coat rack that lay in her path. She had expected to find Kyrett, Ross, and maybe even the woman that had threatened Teki, but she didn't expect that she would see a large white wyvern lying in the small living room, clearly injured and resting among the rubble.

Gress turned around, called out to Daemon to warn him to stay in the car and keep the key in the ignition, and then turned back to the ruined room.

"Rerell. Are you okay?"

The level of compassion in Gress' voice startled Clerski into lifting her feathered head to look at her.

"Hey, Gress, I guess I did have a bit of good luck for once, after all, getting left behind like this." Clerski shook her wings to brush away the dust, and then she shifted back into her mortal form.

"You lost the stone, I assume."

"I did. It was shattered in the fight."

Gress gave an exasperated sigh.

"Couldn't you have told me there was a fight in the first place? I wouldn't assume you wrecked the place on your own, but still," Gress muttered, helping the white-haired woman off of the floor and moving the coat rack. "Whatever. Get in the car."

Clerski's face lit up as she grinned with the smile that reminded Gress of that of a fox. Then her expression went serious again.

“I know where she’s taking Kyrett and Teki. There’s an old mansion further into the forest, and it’s difficult to find because it’s been cloaked by Izoin’s dark powers. I’ve been there before. It belongs to the Arlot family.”

“So, you’ll be able to give us directions?”

Clerski tossed a piece of the fallen ceiling to the side. She stared absentmindedly. She looked like she was trying to remember how to get to that old mansion.

"I should be able to."

Then she paused and her eyes widened as they locked onto the black tourmaline stone that Daemon had clasped back around Gress’ neck when the latter had passed out.

"The stones are the cause of our curses, aren't they? That's why I've been having bad luck since I got mine, and yours... is it for safety?"

"It's for good health," Gress corrected. "I think. I assume that if it was for safety, I'd be somewhere on the side of the road, probably dead by now."

"The other one probably is supposed to help with steadiness or something like that, then. Why haven't you gotten rid of yours yet?"

Gress shook her head and a sad smile played across her face. Clerski was surprised to see so many emotions on the reserved woman's face ever since she found the wyvern in the collapsed building.

"You saw that hassle on the plane. Norris was supposed to hurt me, just enough to catch Teki off guard. She won’t let me remove it otherwise."

To demonstrate, Gress tried to pull the ribbon away from her neck. Her arms froze in place near her neck until she lowered them again.

"How do you sleep with that thing on?"

"Do I have a choice? Teki keeps waking, so I can’t stay up. Help me get it off."

"Oh my goodness," Clerski mumbled.

“I know. Enough about that. We need to find that Izoin woman and hope she hasn’t already killed Kyrett and Ross, and won’t kill Teki. Where’s Norris?”

“She should be around here somewhere,” said Clerski. “I’m sure she’s still nearby.”

Gress paced back towards the door, helping Clerski out of the crumbling wooden doorway. The two walked back to the sports car.

Gress sat back in the driver's seat while Clerski took the back seat behind Daemon, and they were about to catch up on everything when a voice called out to them. Rather, it was more of a bark than a call that echoed through the tiny clearing.

Marlon, Norris' dog, bounded towards the car.

Calmly walking behind her old dog, Norris greeted everyone with a slight wave and a smile. She was far more injured than Clerski was, with her left hand broken and a few deep wounds across her abdomen. Despite this, there was no blood, and she didn't seem phased by the injuries like Clerski had been. As well, Gress' curse didn't inflict similar injuries upon her in response to Norris' wounds. While she tried to hide it, Gress couldn't deny that Clerski's cuts were copied onto her own body.

"Hello, all. I didn't realize you were here. If I did, I would have stayed inside instead of going out into the greenhouse, my dears."

Daemon glanced up and rolled down his window. "I'll have to come back and visit it when we're not so pressed for time," he mused. "Hey, you're a nurse, right?"

"Yes, my dear. Before we left I was doing night classes to become a brain surgeon until this shaking curse took hold, but yes, I'm currently a nurse. Why, may I ask, do you ask this?"

"Miss Clerski here is beat up pretty badly. I'd suggest you try to fix her up. You both used to know each other, I suppose, so I think she'd appreciate your help."

"We still do know each other, you know. Of course I’ll fix her up, my dear." Norris got to work. With Clerski draped across the back seat, Norris cleaned her wounds patiently with the supplies from the first aid kit under the seat.

“Hold still, my dear,” she cooed gently.

“Quin, wait—” Clerski struggled to stay still. She clung to Norris’ scarf.

Daemon interrupted. “Both of you, do that on the way. We’re not delaying the trip for your flirting.”

Norris called out to Marlon and hurried the old brown dog into the car while she tended to Clerski, and the two dragon women continued their exchange.

“Oh, flirting? I’d never flirt on the job, my dear. Unlike a certain someone we know! Rerell, I remember your university crush. I bet remembering that is a little embarrassing these days, isn't it, my dear? Hmm?"

Clerski blushed and didn't reply. It hadn't been too long ago that she played her old invitation from her crush for Teki.

"So I suppose you’re busy today. It’s a shame. My friends all have a meeting today, so I was going to invite you to join me at that frozen yogurt shop in the west end of campus. But if you’re busy with a date or something, oh? I didn’t mean to make you flustered like that…”

In her embarrassment, Clerski had accidentally cast the audio through the car's stereo system. Gress nearly crashed the sports car and she went off the road and into a ditch.

"You had a crush on Kyrett?! What the Hell, Clerski? What's wrong with you?"

Clerski flinched at Gress' sudden vocalization.

"That was a long time ago!"

Gress got out of the car and slammed the door. "You're going to make me sick. I wouldn't care now, but back then? That's absolutely ridiculous!"

"I told you it was embarrassing, my dear," Norris remarked slyly.

"And did Kyrett have any say about it?" Gress asked with great hesitation.

"Oh, my dear, he was completely oblivious. Dear Rerell wouldn’t go meet with him! He did have a wife at the time, but…”

"Daemon," Clerski mumbled. "Aren't you going to tell her to get back in the car?"

"Sorry, Miss Clerski. Even I'm shocked by that one, and I've been roped into some pretty weird relationships. I'm almost considering getting out of the car, myself."

"Damn you, Clerski. I thought you were the best of us," Gress groaned from the side of the highway. "And yet you have the worst mind. I underestimated your bad side."

"I don't like him in that way anymore!"

Gress got back in the car and exhaled loudly. "Just give me the directions."

"My dear, while you're not driving, I should tend to *your* cursed injuries," Norris suggested. She still tended to Clerski, who covered her flustered face.

"Forget it. I'm fine. Nothing important was damaged."

"Well, I have something else that needs to be fixed," Clerski mumbled.

"And what is that, my dear?"

"My pride."

Norris smiled and chuckled. Daemon folded his arms over his chest and stared at the glove compartment, so Gress had to get the dragon women's attention herself.

"You two have been to the mansion, haven't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, my dear. We can get you there as long as you don't mind a bit more off-road driving. I have Izoin tagged so we can follow her when the road ends. You don't mind if I ask Rerell to project my energy field as an image onto the dashboard, do you?"

"Go ahead. I can't stop you."

Norris focused her energy map and Clerski captured it with her mind. After a moment to process it, she projected her newly captured image onto the car. It changed as the energy did, just like the map that Norris always saw in her vision.

"My dear, now we can follow the path to the mansion, even if something happens to either of us. At the point we have to walk the rest of the way, Marlon will be able to guide us. It's a foolproof plan."

Gress wasn't silent for long after Norris' assurance, because she noticed something that it seemed that the others didn't.

She had definitely passed the particular broken tree before. She was now seeing the same mossy stone that they had passed only a minute ago.

"Your bloody map is foolproof, huh? How come we're going in circles?"

"Don't worry about it!" Clerski exclaimed. This is just the cloaking power that hides the mansion from the rest of the world! Just follow the map and don't pay attention to your surroundings. If you do that, you'll make it to your destination."

"I'm starting to agree with Draecyon. Powers are such a pain to people who don't have them," Gress muttered. "I can't believe I'm seriously in this situation."

She paused, then spoke once more.

"And someone get Daemon's boots off of the dash. I can't see from that side of the windshield."

"I told you, my dear. You don't need to see. Look at the map, because outside is a complex illusion," Norris reminded her, kicking the back of Daemon's seat to get his attention. "Just keep your eyes on the energy map."

Gress had never tried to drive without looking at the road before her. What she was doing defied all common sense. Yet, she had no other choice, so she did what was asked of her. She could only hope that Norris and Clerski knew that they were on the right path.

CHAPTER 20

Gress was sick of driving past the same scenery over and over.

She wasn't new to driving by any means, but it wasn't easy to travel over a path that was partially obscured when some of the obstacles weren't even real. It especially wasn't easy when Clerski fell asleep on Norris' shoulder, causing the map to disappear from the dash until the librarian woke up again.

Therefore, it was more than just relieving when the brighter dot on the map overlapped with their location and Gress was finally able to stop the car. "I thought it was going to run out of gas before we got here," she said as she parked the sports car and rolled up the windows.

Finally, the illusion wore off because of the close proximity they were to their destination. They were at a mansion, and though the exterior was relatively clean, there were a few hidden signs of neglect that Gress was able to notice after a moment of sizing up the looming building.

"It doesn't look like it will collapse. We should go in before night falls, though."

Norris glanced up from her pocket book, then Clerski and Daemon followed suit in staring at the mansion.

"We're finally here," Norris sighed in relief. "But, my dears, I'd like to investigate the area before you all go in. I would like to make a map of this place for us to use in case Miss Izoin attempts to use an illusion to trick us. After all, I've been through here on a few occasions in the past."

"Take care," Gress grunted. "Come back safely. We don't know what's in there."

"I promise I won't let that demon get to me. Can I speak with Rerell outside for a moment first?"

"Do whatever you want," said Gress.

Norris and Clerski got out of the car and walked towards the door of the mansion. Norris took Clerski's hands.

"My dear, Rerell," started Norris, smiling serenely at the other woman and letting her eyes glass over a little behind her blue lenses. "My apologies for leading us astray. Mizz Izoin isn't a dragon hunter."

"You couldn't help it," said Clerski. "She tricked us all!"

"But I led us astray nonetheless."

Norris unclasped the delicate cross necklace with the cherry blossom engraving. She held it in her trembling hands for a moment. When Clerski took the blue kyanite stone from Norris and tossed it onto the ground, Norris' hands still shook, but less fervently this time.

"I promised to deliver this necklace to someone who would remember that dead girl's memory. I thought that meant a fellow dragon hunter. I was wrong on that notion, but I must ask you a favor so I can honor that promise. My dear," Norris addressed, turning towards Clerski. "May I ask you to hold my necklace until I get back?"

"Oh, of course!" Clerski agreed. "It will be too dangerous in there for it, so I'll keep it safe until you come back!"

Norris smiled sentimentally and clasped the necklace around Clerski's neck. Despite the warm air, her breath condensed into a cloud. Gress had to wonder if Norris secretly smoked, but decided that she wouldn't ask.

Norris and Clerski shared a kiss. Clerski raised her hand to her lips afterward as if trying to memorize the moment.

"Ah, my dear, I must be going now," said Norris. Her breath condensed again.

"Be careful," Clerski said softly.

Norris picked up her blue kyanite, walked to the mansion's wooden doors, and pushed them open. They creaked loudly. "My dears, wish me luck," she said, not because she was superstitious like Clerski, but

simply out of the habit of using the expression. Then, with a moment of hesitation, she entered the mansion.

Gress, Clerski, and Daemon waited in the car, only getting out every now and then to walk Marlon around the small clearing.

"I don't think he likes riding in vehicles," Daemon noted after their fifth walk. "He seems very distraught."

"Don't dogs like cars?" Gress asked. "I'm sure it's nothing." She led Marlon back to the sports car, trying to avoid thinking too much about the frantically pacing dog. While she didn't want to alert anyone of her suspicions, Gress was afraid that Marlon knew something was wrong with Norris. *I suspect that he senses an illusion from within the mansion. If Norris doesn't come out soon, we'll have to go in to look for her.* "Maybe he hates being separated from Norris."

"I'm going in for her," Clerski exclaimed. She adjusted her red glasses and made a stride towards the door.

"Wait," Gress ordered. Gress rested a hand on Clerski's shoulder to stop her. "If we go in just yet, we might disrupt whatever Norris is doing in there. It would be dangerous. Let's wait another… three minutes, and if Marlon doesn't calm down, we'll go in."

Clerski sat on the hood of the car and glanced anxiously at the door.

"I should have told her about the cursed stone, first! She might have been back if she didn't have to deal with her unsteady body. Maybe I should have given her a good luck charm."

"They don't work."

"I said goodbye, didn't I? I can't remember. What if I should have said *see you later* instead? Gress, I'm getting worried."

"Marlon is too," Daemon called from across the small clearing. "He's getting worse. I believe you have a good reason to panic with

how crazy that Izoin is. Maybe she captured Norris before she completed the map? I don't know, just a possibility."

They could barely hear those words over the sound of Marlon's deep and panicked barks.

"I'm going to find her," Clerski declared. "If you guys want to stay here, I can't blame you."

With that, the white-haired, fox-faced woman dashed towards the mansion's wooden doors with a stare of determination in her eyes.

"I'll follow Rerell," Gress grunted. "I don't like the fact that Norris hasn't returned."

"Well, I'm staying here. If anything happened, I don't want to face it just yet," Daemon sighed. "Anyways, someone needs to take care of Marlon for now."

Clerski pushed the mansion's creaking doors wide open and the sunlight flooded into the porch. Gress noted that the room was dusty and it must have not been cleaned in many years. A wide staircase stood in a spiral at the far end of the main room, and as they walked farther in, the doors tilted closer together as if on their own. *The mansion is on an angle. I wish those doors would stay open so we'd have more light.*

"Hey! Norris!" Clerski called through the seemingly empty room. "Hey, are you okay in here?"

Another faint breath of smoke lingered in the air. Upon looking upwards, the two saw Norris. Her face was pale and her breath sparkling, and her body was faced back towards the doorway. If Gress guessed correctly, she was paralyzed.

"What did Izoin do to you?" Clerski called.

"Rerell." Gress laid her hand on the librarian's shoulder. "I don't think Izoin did this."

Norris' thin line of a grin widened. It was a sad grin. Then, still paralyzed, she glanced through the blue lenses of her glasses to look at her two friends.

Just as she had hoped, Clerski was still wearing the silver cross necklace.

Using most of her strength, Norris forced herself to speak, though her vocal cords didn't want to move. "My dears, the map… it's complete. Please…"

Her shimmering body began turning into dust and it wisped away slowly, starting from her torso, forehead, and her neck. In a single quick convulsion, nine bullet wounds opened.

One was just below her hairline. Five were in her chest and stomach. Two were in her throat. The final one, which looked like the first one that had been shot, was a small hole in her hand.

No blood left these wounds. They were not new wounds. Her shimmering, deteriorating body flaked away through these wounds like sand from a broken hourglass.

Norris wanted to explain why this was happening, but her vocal cords had already turned to dust through the two holes in her throat. She wanted to explain to Rerell that there were no hard feelings over the lack of a goodbye. She wanted to apologize to Gress, because she hadn't told her that she was the dead girl who owned the necklace all along.

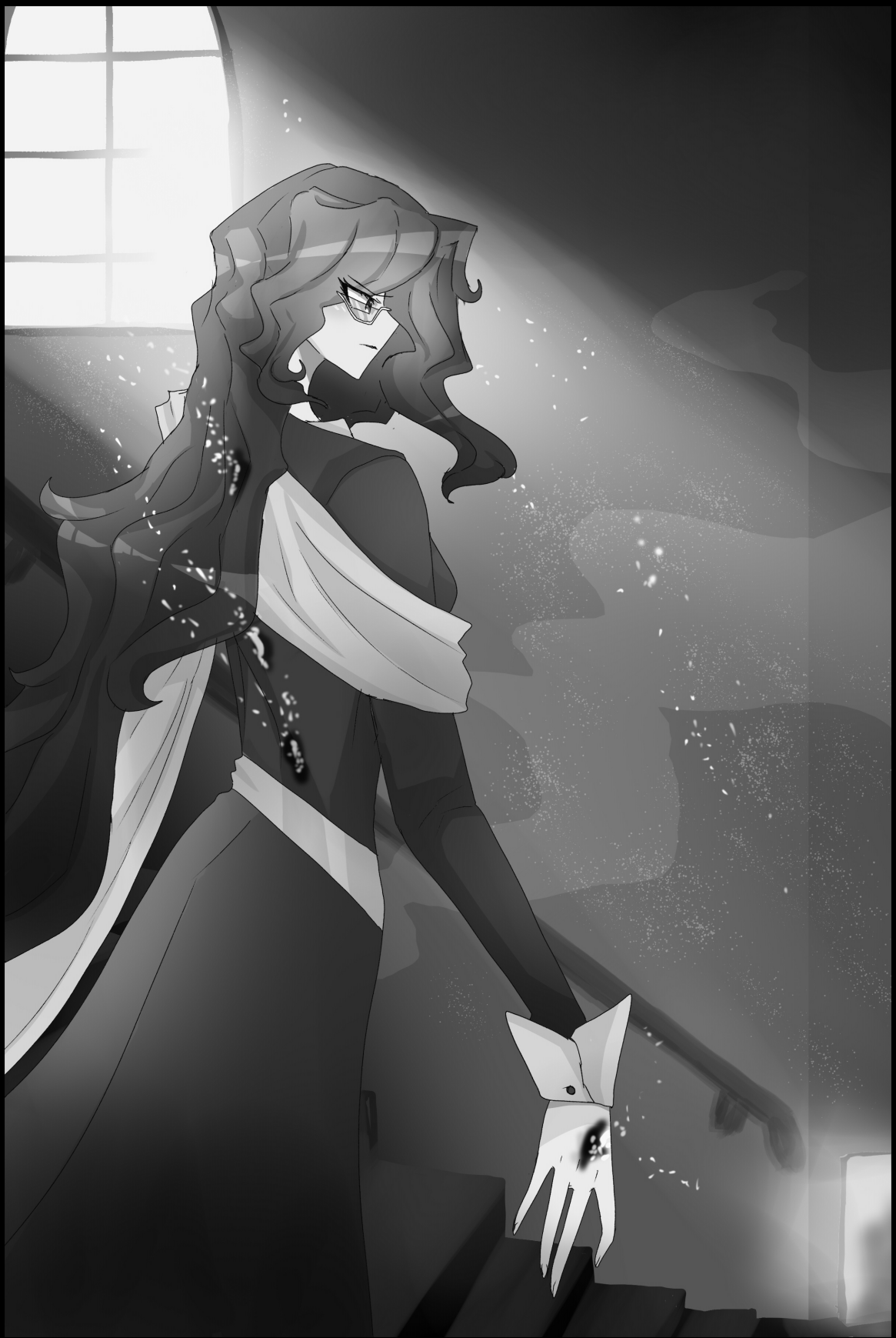
Because the reason Norris was dying was simple. She was already dead. She had been killed long ago, and her lingering spirit took the necklace off of her dead body— the half dragon, half hunter with the nine bullets in her body— and promised herself she would deliver it to someone who would remember her.

She was dying because she delivered it to Clerski.

And somehow inside, she was at peace. She was in a true sense of peace, unlike when she had been alive and she had been convinced to follow her family tradition of dragon hunting, and the only peace she got was the sense of release and the overwhelming feeling of hunter powers. She had surrendered herself to them back then for the mad, blissful feeling that hunting had originally given her. This new peace was not like that. For once, she truly did feel calm in the face of her own deterioration.

But she still had things she wanted to say.

She wanted to say it was finally time. To apologize for the bad timing, but that her time left in the world was fading quickly. That she had to move on now or she never would.



She wanted to thank the whole travel group for the chance to join them as far as she did.

She wanted to apologize for everything, simply everything.

But all these things would have to go unsaid. Everything she wanted to thank them for would remain in her own head until it inevitably crumbled away in a shower of glittering dust. She had so many things she wanted to say to them. She had so many messages she wanted to pass on.

She wanted to see the wedding. She hadn't joined the group to see it, but now she found that she wanted to be there when it happened, and she wanted to guarantee that it would run smoothly. She wouldn't find out.

She wanted to thank Kyrett for his help over the years. She wished that Gress would tell him that she had settled down nearby instead of telling him that she died. She would have rathered he be disappointed that she never went after him than depressed that she did and didn't make it out alive.

She wanted to repay Daemon for helping her on the flight.

She wanted to have had the chance to really get to know Ross.

She wanted to know that Gress would get to teach again when the wedding was over.

She wished that she knew Marlon would end up in a good home.

But she couldn't convey those thoughts.

Most of all, Quin Norris wished that she could have told Rerell Clerski everything that she didn't get the chance to, even over the life they had spent together. That she loved her the whole time. All she could hope for now was that the map she had made between the time she had completed her last task of giving the necklace to Rerell and the time in which she started to crumble away would be useful enough to her remaining friends that it could help them get through the mansion safely.

That was all she could hope for. Her body still turning to dust and pouring from her nine circular wounds, she glanced down one more time, locked eyes with Rerell Clerski, and finally crumbled completely. For Quin Norris, or Sakura Odile, it was over. There

wouldn't be an end to the group's journey in her lifetime; her own was over.

Quin Norris was dead.

Neither Clerski nor Gress spoke as the former trudged up the staircase to collect the dust in her arms, crying and in shock. Gress, too, was in shock. She hadn't processed the events enough for her to cry yet. Later, when it set in that Norris wouldn't be waiting in the car, joining them on the flight back, or requesting a hotel room to be shared, she would pitch a fit of tears for her fallen friend. Now, there was only a sense of disbelief and a refusal to accept the nurse's fate.

But out of courtesy to Clerski and respect to Norris, she, too, collected the dust and poured it into an old bottle that had been lying neglected on the mansion's floor.

"Wait here. I'll carry the bottle to the car."

Almost as if her body was on autopilot, Gress stepped back out into the daylight and unlocked the sports car, placing the bottle in the center console. Daemon was confused. He didn't ask about the bottle, however, because he could almost guess what had happened.

"Gress...?"

"We're going back in now. I hope you know someone who can take care of a dog."

"Gress, your voice is wavering. That can't be… can it?"

Gress didn't reply, but she nodded briefly as she snatched a pen from the car and chewed it silently.

"Ah…"

She had broken the pen with her teeth absentmindedly. The blue ink flowed out as a small trail that ran beneath the corner of her mouth.

"Gress?"

Gress shook her head. "Please don't make me say it."

"I see. It *is* Norris."

Even Daemon cried that day. He walked Gress into the mansion and stayed clear of Clerski until she had given a signal that her first of many crying fits was over for now.

They didn't want to continue on. At least, they wanted to take that day to wait until the flood of emotions passed over, but they didn't have that kind of time.

Clerski projected the map into the dusty air before them. “I think she wanted us to make full use of it,” she mumbled. “But then again, I’m not sure. There’s so much I still didn’t know about her. Who am I to guess?”

“No, I’m sure she did,” Gress affirmed. “You still knew her best. Come on, then. We need to go up the staircase and turn left.”

Gress lingered behind the other two as they walked.

“You coming?”

“I’m on the way.” Then, with her breath hitching in her throat and in nothing more than a whisper, she thanked Norris for all of her help and caught up to the others.

CHAPTER 21

Against their better judgement, the group split up. Each of them had a copy of Norris' final map, but as the map showed, there were three different dots for Kyrett, Ross, and Teki. Therefore, if they even wanted a small chance of making it to James on time for the wedding, they had to each choose one person to look for.

Daemon quickly chose to look for Ross. "I've seen her as if she was a little sister to me," he said. "And after hanging out with her at the hotel, we kinda understand each other. I've even helped her catch up on her science work, and that'll go to waste if she's not found, you know?"

According to the map, Ross was kept in a series of underground stone passageways, so that was Daemon's destination.

To avoid embarrassment over recently revealing her university crush on Kyrett, Clerski decided that she'd search for Teki. After all, it seemed that Teki had warmed up to her quite a bit, so it would be easier for her to save the bride-to-be than if Gress were to do so. There was also the matter that Gress and Teki couldn't touch or they'd drop dead. Clerski took Marlon with her; Gress didn't want to and Daemon was searching for Ross, who was allergic to dogs.

Therefore, Gress was left to search for Kyrett. Somehow, she felt like that would be the easiest on her, because she didn't know Ross well and she still wasn't sure where her strained relationship with Teki stood.

Being the first to be assigned (or self-assign) a hostage to find, Daemon set off for the passageways first. If it wasn't for the map, he wouldn't have found the staircase that led below ground, as it was hidden by an illusion that made it look simply like a stone wall. However, because of the map, he swiftly found the entrance to the cold hallways under the mansion.

He wasn't prepared for the chill that bit through the frigid air, so much harsher than the June weather the group had become accustomed to. As well as the lingering cold, Daemon also noticed the damp atmosphere and a smell that could only be one form of mold or another. He was glad that Ross, at least, had her panther form to keep herself warmer.

"This place needs to be fixed up," Daemon muttered to himself.

He walked, and walked, and checked the map, and walked some more. The passageways felt never-ending. Maybe that was an illusion too.

He was now so close to her, he could almost sense her presence with his own (hardly used and barely trained) psychic energies. Yet, all he could see in the dead end of stone was a pile of rubble and a faint beam of sun that split through a small crack in the ceiling.

That's where the map said Ross was. She couldn't have been—?

"Ross…?"

There was no answer, but the pile of stone bricks twitched a bit.

Daemon rushed to the pile and started pushing stones from the top, trying to find the source of the movement. If Ross' dot on the map really did align with this spot, the motion had to be from—?

He didn't want to think about it, but at least if there was movement, she was still alive.

"Ross…"

The rubble twitched again. A frail hand reached through the rocks in a sparkling opera glove, one which Daemon knew Ross had only after coming back from shopping with Teki.

Daemon hurried his pace removing the stones and tried frantically to pull Ross from the rubble.

"Daemon? Daemon… the plant…"

Ross, with her head now uncovered but her body still crushed by stones, tilted her head to point towards the potted daisy sprawled across the ground. Her voice was strained, as strained as it sounded in her cat form. She wheezed as if she couldn't breathe.

"Do you have your inhaler?" Daemon asked, staying at Ross' side.

"The plant… please…" Ross said again. "I need it. I need Wilt."

Right. The plant. Daemon scooped the plant from the ground, finding its pot shattered and the daisy withering. This flower, Wilt, shared a name with Ross' cat form, for they were one and the same. This flower, Wilt, was how Ross breathed.

As he collected Wilt, his hand brushed something strangely familiar. He picked up half of a beige metal structure, smooth and cold.

It was the mask Ross wore in her cat form. Split down the seam.

Daemon panicked. He tried to take as much of the flower's soil into his arms as he could. He returned to Ross and tried to place it in her arms, but she shook her head.

"It's warmer in your arms." Her voice was barely audible now.

Daemon's head darted around as he tried to make sense of this, and then he held the flower closer, afraid to crush it but trying to keep it from the cold.

"I'll keep you safe," Daemon said, half to Ross and half to the plant. He didn't know how he would do that. Ross was crushed under rocks and couldn't breathe. The plant wasn't much more than a weakening flower and roots barely clinging to the soil that remained. The once sturdy stem doubled over now. The daisy dropped a few white petals.

"It's okay, Daemon," breathed Ross. "I've enjoyed travelling with you. Please tell everyone I…"

"You're not gonna die, Ross. I don't care what happened last year, you aren't *supposed* to die so soon. You're not *meant* to die."

How could he help her? She couldn't die. She couldn't.

"Hold on," he muttered to himself. "If you talk to plants, it gives them air."

Daemon lifted the withering flower and started talking to it gently, as if he were talking to a small animal rather than a plant. "Hey, I know this is hard on you, okay? But you can do this. You're gonna be okay. I believe in you, okay?"

Daemon didn't know what he was aiming for. He just said whatever was on his mind.

"I promise I'll get you out of here safely, and then I'll try to fix your mask. Whatever Izoin did to you must be pretty painful, isn't it? I wish I could've done something sooner. Listen, you'll get out of here safely. I promise."

"Daemon…" Ross' voice was strained now, like the act of speaking was causing her pain. Ross' breath hitched in her throat and she uttered a few words before she lost consciousness. "Daemon… you've done so much for me… thank you…"

And as she sank back into the rubble, and as he continued to speak to the plant, Daemon hoped he could sustain Ross long enough to get her and the plant to safety.

Afraid to leave Ross' side, he did anyway as he brought the flower to the one beam of light that broke through the ceiling. Once the flower appeared to recover just slightly, he returned to Ross and continued to lift her from the rubble.

When he lifted her out of the stones, she shifted into her feline form, a defense mechanism in her unconscious state. He kept talking to Wilt — both the plant and the cat — so she would have enough air to breathe. He lifted the bipedal feline over his shoulders and held tighter to the daisy as he proceeded to stumble back through the stone passageways. He struggled to carry such a large panther over his shoulders, but he continued to reassure Wilt that she'd be okay in the end. He refused to let her share Norris' fate, and he wanted her to know that.

Eventually, he managed to stumble back up the staircase that had been hidden as a wall, and he backtracked his path through the mansion. He was glad that he had the map. His vision lied to him from the mansion's protective illusions, but the orange lines on the map's ethereal, dark blue surface told him where he needed to go, and the red dots told him where he currently was.

He trudged along the main living room's red carpets and into the porch where he had entered from. He was grateful for the sunlight that poured into the porch. He made sure it reached the daisy. "We're almost out," he told Wilt. "We're almost out of the mansion. There's a toolkit in the glove compartment. I can try to fix your mask when we get out there."

Ross didn't stir. She hung limply over Daemon's shoulder, unresponsive. However, he felt that somewhere deep down, she had heard him.

He pulled her out into the sunlight and breathed a sigh of relief. No matter how hard it had been on both of them, he had found her and

brought her to safety. Now he could only hope that he could truly save her in time. His real task had only just begun.

It was one he was willing to fight for.

CHAPTER 22

According to the map, Teki was located in the stables that were past the mansion's library. Clerski figured that Izoin had guessed that she'd be going after Teki due to the fact that the two had been travelling together, but she didn't expect the demon to pull a cheap move like trying to distract her with a library. She decided that no matter what she saw in the mansion, she'd keep going and rescue Teki.

However, avoiding distractions was difficult. Marlon kept howling, and despite the fact that he was clearly an aging dog, he seemed to have a nervous energy that she would sooner associate with that of a puppy moving into its new home for the first time.

"It's okay, Marlon," she tried to reassure the dog.

The brown dog lifted its head to meet Clerski's eyes. He stopped howling, but he still whimpered.

"There's something down here, isn't there? Something you don't like?"

Though she wasn't usually the one to get involved in any adventures or strange situations, Clerski wasn't stupid. She had taken care of dogs before. She had a way of reading people and animals alike. She was the first to figure out that there was something wrong with Kyrett back when Beta first possessed him, other than his oldest son.

Clerski wasn't new to knowing when something just wasn't right. Call it intuition, or maybe just attentiveness, but the result was the same. And something was definitely bothering Marlon.

She was cautious as she approached the red dot on the shining map, but she was also wary for a different reason. There weren't enough dots on the map. Daemon and Ross were now outside, but they still

registered within the map's borders. Kyrett's dot was where it had been the whole time. Izoin was in the library, waiting for Clerski and under the assumption that Clerski didn't have a map. And of course, she was on the map with Marlon. Where was Gress? Was she the dot that clipped in and out, headed towards Kyrett?

"Oh, I never understand what she gets up to. She's probably pulling another trick of hers."

Clerski started to walk towards a staircase, but Marlon barked and kept walking on their regular route. Whatever he was nervous about, it seemed to Clerski that he wanted to investigate it after all. He even seemed to be trying to act tough by standing with his graying chest puffed out and his head held high.

"You're certainly Norris' dog, no doubt about it," Clerski laughed. "We can go after it if you want."

And so, Clerski carefully continued on her path towards Teki until she heard a voice from the library. The voice was muffled due to the large wooden doors blocking out most of the sound, but she could pick out some of the words.

"Hmm. I'll have to test that again. What a hassle. Oh? Is Ross already gone?"

Clerski realized that the woman inside was most likely Izoin, and she had already figured out that Daemon had escaped with Ross. Did she have a map, too? Or did she have cameras hidden around the mansion? Clerski knew she'd have to be extra careful.

"*Tch*," the voice hissed in disdain. Surprisingly, Izoin seemed to be irritated with either herself or someone who was already inside the library. Except, the map showed only her and no one else besides.

Clerski wondered if she should go after Teki and then return to confront Izoin or if she should walk into the library right away. Teki couldn't have been guarded if Izoin was in the library, after all.

Marlon made the decision for her by tugging her sleeve with his mouth, leading her away from the large, engraved doors.

However, Clerski didn't stray from the library for long, because she walked back before continuing towards Teki. She wanted to listen to the ramblings inside in case it could provide useful information.

"These books are useless."

While Clerski flinched at this statement, she didn't go after Izoin. After all, it could've just been an attempt to get her in through the doors.

Through the doors, the sound of a bookshelf getting knocked over resounded.

The anger behind pushing over a shelf seemed right for the woman who was holding three people hostage in a mansion in the forest, but Clerski found herself becoming skeptical of if it was really Izoin in the library. It sounded like the person in there struggled to knock over the shelf. Izoin would have been strong enough to do it in one push.

Marlon tugged Clerski's sleeve with more force this time, and she decided that she wouldn't get distracted again until she had found Teki.

"Rerell."

"I guess I have no choice but to get distracted," the tall woman sighed to her dog companion. "Sorry, Marlon."

"Rerell. Don't come in."

The voice definitely didn't belong to the demon. However, it was still too muffled to be distinguished.

"Send Marlon ahead. Stay at the door for now. I need your help."

When Marlon was finally on his way to Teki, a scratching sound shuffled at the door and it swung open fiercely.

Standing at the door was Gress, who should have been on her way to find Kyrett. She was covered in wounds from being still unable to ditch her curse, wounds that had alerted her to Ross being crushed under fallen stones. Behind her, books were scattered and pages had been pulled out, but it seemed that they were repairing themselves as the two stared each other down in the doorway.

"She tricked me with an illusion. Update, I can do something new with Daraegys. Another update, I still can't remember anything I learned as Daraegys."

"So that's how you ended up here? That means the person on the map, going towards Kyrett is—!"

Gress cut Clerski off with a small grunt. Clerski went silent because, quite frankly, Gress intimidated her when she got all serious like that.

"Beta."

"Huh?"

"The person going after Kyrett is Beta. His old demon. I thought he said you met Beta before, but maybe he was mistaken."

"Are you serious? How did you…?"

"Hm… well, you and…" Gress hesitated. "You and Norris had been mentioning Beta a lot recently. I pieced it together from what Kyrett had told me about his life and determined that Izoin is Beta. When I thought about it, I don't know how we never saw it. The deciding factor was the illusions. Kyrett thought the candle was a mug because of such illusions. As well, everyone I've met who has powers is either from the future or they were given them by someone from the future. You, Kyrett… Norris… you came from another time. So did Teki. She trained Daemon, Kyrett modified Ross. Then there's me. I only got the spirit of Daraegys sent into me at the moment Teki first possessed me, so I wouldn't be magical otherwise. That means Izoin has to come from the future, since Draecyon would have met her goal of eliminating powers here the first time she lived through this time, and Izoin lines up with everything about Beta."

"Are you saying that Izoin is possessed like Kyrett was?"

"That's…"

"It is a possibility, isn't it? Believable?"

"*Ridiculous*." Gress glanced towards her mohair sweater and brushed some dust off of it, nonchalantly. "It's simple. Izoin *is* Beta."

In reality, Gress didn't know if this fact was true or not, but she thought that telling this to Clerski would make the otherwise flighty woman take their situation more seriously.

She cleaned up her cuts with the loose pages that lay around, and the look in her eye made it clear that she wanted to say something else, but she hadn't decided to say it yet.

"...Norris was right. Izoin never was a dragon hunter. All of them are gone."

At this statement, Clerski clenched her teeth and barely kept herself from lashing out at Gress. Sure, it was an innocent statement, but

Clerski didn't feel that Gress understood the full meaning of her words. *All of them* were gone.

She uttered a quick, "how could," but before she could finish, the newfound fire in her chest sent her turning where she stood and storming out of the library.

"How could you say that?"

Somewhere inside, she knew that her outburst at Gress' statement was unnecessary. Yet, she also hated the idea that anyone, even her friend, could get away with mentioning the loss of Norris that way. To not be able to utter her name without hesitation, Clerski understood, but to mention her passing in passing was just wrong!

Feeling the dust in the air stick to her skin, Clerski only felt worse as she ran as fast as her legs would carry her over the velvet carpet, her only relief being when her emotion-driven tears washed clean, salty trails down her cheeks. She just wanted to get away from everything she had become used to in those last two days.

Surely, Gress had to be confused, or maybe just upset, at Clerski's behavior. In the opposite roles, Clerski realized as she ran that Gress would be thinking she had done something wrong, which while she had by default, it wasn't anything worth the reaction she was given. Surely, Gress thought it was something she had done.

"Damn it!" Clerski cried out to no one in particular. She dashed a little longer and finally stopped when the carpet turned to bare wood.

Finally, she let the second round of tears fully escape and clutched the silver cross in her hands, refusing to let go.

She didn't care that Beta was back. She could care about that later.

She wanted to turn around and fly back to the small high school. She wanted to walk into the nurse's office and be able to know that no matter what, Nurse Odile would be there. That she would be sitting at her small desk like usual, maybe even reading her small pocket book if there was no one who needed to be treated.

But even then, even if she went back, no one would be there. It would be an empty space.

She tried to calm herself down by running her eyes over the silver necklace. It was simple, but she found comfort in the small cherry blossoms engraved on the back.

This fact only made Clerski cry more. Cherry blossoms— the flowers that only lasted for a brief, fleeting moment— rested on Norris' necklace.

She reminded herself that Norris knew the whole time that she was a ghost. That the cherry blossoms were a reminder of her duty to herself from when she was alive.

Clerski wiped her eyes with her sleeve and slowly approached Marlon's dot on the map. She knew he was still nearby because she heard him howling, likely for the same reason she cried. Surprisingly, he had waited halfway for her.

"Thanks, Marlon. I guess we should get Teki before we have to face Beta, huh?"

Marlon pressed his cold nose to Clerski's hand.

Finally, Clerski finished her journey to the room where Teki was held. The farther she went, the more neglected the mansion looked, so she figured that the evil spirit woman was intentionally being stashed away in the place that was the least cared for. It would make her task difficult as she carefully avoided holes in the wooden floor.

Surprisingly, the door to the room at the end of the hall was made of steel rather than the wooden ones found throughout the rest of the mansion.

Clerski mumbled this fact to herself absentmindedly, capturing the attention of the woman inside.

"Clerski! You haven't run into Izoin, have you? I don't know what she's planning, but she tricked me into thinking she had James trapped in this bloody mansion!"

Clerski transformed into a wyvern and used her powerful tail to break the door in.

She transformed back and looked around, and as she did, she realized why the door was made of steel. Though it was an odd design choice on the part of those who built the building to have the stables upstairs, Clerski couldn't deny that this is what the room was meant for.

It, indeed, was a stable, horses and all.

She realized that this is where Kyrett used to store his family's horses whenever they went for a jousting tournament, a sport that the

family used to love. Because she was in the past compared to when she had known the boys and their horses, these horses in the stables were much younger, but she knew them well. The oldest son's horse, Centauri. The youngest's Vince. The other boy's Strike. They were all in that stable. Even Kyrett's own horse, a palomino mare named Sheldi, was there.

In the stall farthest from the door, Draecyon was kept, though she paced around it in an agitated manner.

Clerski had an idea.

"Teki, have you ever been on a horse?"

"Of course I have been! I lived in the time when that was the easiest way to travel, you know!"

That's right. Clerski kept forgetting that Teki, that Draecyon, was such an old sorceress.

"You'd be okay riding in your wedding dress, right? Take Centauri, please. He's the most well-trained, so you'll be okay."

"Don't act like I can't still ride," Teki huffed, but a small grin on the beast's muzzle betrayed her amusement.

"Good, then! I'll take Vince, since he's used to me. As well, Strike is far too tall and feisty, and Sheldi will be useful for when Gress gets Kyrett."

Clerski unlocked the gates, releasing Teki and the tall white stallion she would be riding. Then she released her own partner, the dun colt Vince.

Once Draecyon had turned back into her own human form, the two women mounted their horses. Clerski couldn't help but to think, as she held onto Strike's halter beside her, that Norris would have loved to ride the black stallion again. She had been rather good with the stubborn horse, after all.

"Teki, can you hold onto Sheldi beside you? We might need her later."

"Huh? Oh, if you need me to," Teki sighed, taking the reins in one hand.

"One more thing. Kyrett's told you about Beta, right?" asked Clerski.

"His old demon? The one that killed his wife?"

“Beta is Izoin. Izoin is Beta. We need to be careful, Teki.”

"I knew something was strange about her!" Teki spat, then impatiently motioned for the calm stallion Centauri to begin walking.

Clerski followed behind on Vince’s back. She hoped that Gress had already gone back for Kyrett instead of focusing on whatever new thing she could do as Daraegys.

CHAPTER 23

Still in the library, Gress found herself lying on the floor beside the old leather chair. She couldn't remember the events that caused her to be there, so she could only figure that she had been experimenting with her odd, dragon-like power once again.

Her hunch was supported by a note that was scrawled in pen, left in the margins of the torn page that lay beside her. She sat up, brushed the dust off of her mohair sweater, and took the paper up into her hand.

"I have successfully progressed in my powers," she read aloud. "I am now less restricted in which things I can turn into a temporary dragon-like body. Previously, I had to form objects together. Now, I have thrice been able to transform a single object into a large dragon shape. This means I am no longer restricted by which objects I have nearby."

She paused to read it over again so she could commit her advancements to memory, then she continued. "As well, due to this, I can stay in the artificial bodies much longer. I don't have to worry about my new forms flaking apart, just the fact that they eventually shrink back to their regular size and shift back into their original states. That allows me much more time to work with. There is one final restriction that I have learned: I cannot make a body from hard plastic. I haven't figured out why. That is all."

Gress grimaced at the cursed wounds upon noticing them again, gave a small *tsk* sound towards her pain, and stood up. Her eyes scanned around the damaged library.

"Right. Rerell was pissed at me for this, no doubt."

She stuffed the marked up page into her pocket for future reference. "Well, I guess I should be prepared enough to face Izoin. No doubt she'll be keeping a close eye on Kyrett."

Then, Gress paused again. Her map was in the corner of her vision, but there was no doubt that Teki's dot was moving quickly. If Gress interpreted that information correctly, knowing Clerski couldn't carry Teki that quickly on her own, that meant that both she and Teki were awake at the same time.

"Hmm. So I've progressed with the overlap, too. Why didn't I write it down?"

Gress unfolded her page again and looked over it. She had, as Daraegys, circled the word *awake* in an unfinished loop. She figured that she had left that hint for herself as her dragon body had shifted back into its original material.

However, she knew that either she or Teki only had a limited time before one of them would be forced to stop again, and she knew that it would most likely be her. After all, the power that caused them to be affected by each other's sleeping cycles was Teki's rather than her own.

Satisfied that she had everything written down earlier that she needed to know now that she didn't remember, Gress folded the paper back up and calmly exited the ruined library. Kyrett was being held in the master bedroom at the other end of the mansion, so she knew that she'd have a fair bit of time to plan how she was going to challenge Izoin if the time came that she had to.

Although, she didn't think that she would do much planning even if she did have more time. She'd take precautions with her actions when it seemed necessary, such as how she had taken the time to wrap a few thick layers of bandages around her chest and abdomen beneath her clothes to deal with the cursed wounds, but other than that, she knew that she would likely just try to adapt to whatever situation that came up when it happened.

Despite the looming feeling of having an unknown time limit, Gress didn't run to Kyrett's room. "As if I'm going to wear myself out or make myself sweaty before I get there," she grumbled. "The air here is already gritty. That would only make me feel miserable."

So, she walked to the east of the mansion, and she realized that it was a good thing that she hadn't ran. By the time she got there, Izoin was out of the room so she could attempt to sneak in with only Kyrett seeing her there.

The lock on the door was a strange, new digital lock that required some sort of card key. Gress figured that Izoin probably had it.

"If I kick down the bloody door, there will be too much noise. My other option is to send my soul into the lock and turn it into a dragon. Then again, that will also be pretty loud if the door shatters around me. Ridiculous. I hate being in situations like this."

To test what would happen, Gress took the folded book page from her pocket and shuffled it onto the machine. Nothing happened.

"Hmm. It needs a card for sure, then."

She didn't have a card in her pockets, and she hated carrying a purse with her, so she had nothing small enough to go into the lock. She frowned.

In the end, she got past the lock by striking it with a piece of the armor from a nearby decorative knight's armor set. She expected at least an electric shock, but somehow the energy was neutralized the moment it contacted her skin.

That must've been the last thing that she had been training as Daraegys. Kyrett had mentioned in her fight against Norris that Daraegys was historically documented as being able to absorb energies.

It didn't concern her much now, but she had to consider herself impressed to find that she had made it into Kyrett's room without even so much as a scratch.

The master bedroom, like the remainder of the well maintained parts of the mansion, was carpeted in ivory and gold tones. Matching ivory curtains kept the sun from pouring through the gaping windows. Gress couldn't help but notice that even the canopy above the king-

sized bed was the exact same shade. "Someone had too much time on their hands," she muttered.

As her eyes scanned over the room, they paused on Kyrett. His jacket was gone, leaving only his white button-up shirt to cover him, and the buttons were aligned in the wrong holes. His eyes were closed, his face was flushed, and Gress could only presume he was asleep. Two wine glasses, one white wine barely touched (Izoin's) and one red wine emptied (Kyrett's) lay on the bureau that was crafted from the wood of a cherry tree.

Gress frowned and checked Kyrett's glass for poison or medicine, to find that Kyrett had been drugged, but not lethally.

Because the man's glasses were still on, and they were lopsided on his face as he rested, Gress carefully removed them from his face and placed them beside the glasses on the bureau. She didn't dare attempt to pick Kyrett up and carry him over his shoulder, however, because she could see that Izoin was approaching again from her map. She quickly ducked under the bed. She made sure to pull a black metal decoration from the wall as she went down, knowing that if she had to turn it into a temporary body, she'd rather be made of metal rather than something like glass or ceramic.

She made sure that even her breathing was quieter when Izoin walked back into the room. From under the bed, she could still hear the woman's voice.

"Another attempt to escape? I thought you gave up on those. Oh well. You must've been done in by the wine so much that you didn't leave, after all."

Izoin's eyes didn't leave Kyrett's sleeping body. Gress figured that the woman must have been rather bored with the resting man. Her guess was supported when a quick shake from above told her that she had started trying to shake Kyrett awake.

Izoin took up her own glass of wine and threw its contents at the curtain. Presumably, she was trying to make it look to Kyrett that she, too, was going to be as wasted as he was. *That doesn't make sense,* Gress thought to herself. *What could she want from him that would make it necessary to do that?*

Kyrett woke up, looked around, then grinned peacefully. "Gress!"

Crap! He's going to give away my hiding spot!

Izoin walked closer to him, and Gress' breath hitched in her throat. *She's going to check under the bed! Damn it, don't look down here, don't find me...*

Yet, Izoin ignored Gress as if she didn't know she was there. The Classics teacher held her breath. She could only see Izoin's ankles at that angle, but she knew even from the other woman's actions that she wasn't in any danger of being found.

Izoin was up on the bed now, laying the empty glass beside Kyrett and sitting close to him. Gress didn't know that she laid her head on his shoulder, but she did know that they had to be close together by the way the bed sank down above her and by the fact that their two dots on the map had almost merged to become one.

Yet, from what Gress could tell, Izoin was neither threatening Kyrett, nor was she being overly affectionate with him. It was as if she was waiting for him to do something. *But what the Hell is she waiting for?*

Kyrett stood up and shakily and walked to the corner of the room that was closest to the door. He motioned for Izoin to follow him. Now that Gress could see the two clearly, she held her breath again in anticipation. Was Kyrett going to attack Izoin? Did he know Gress was beneath the bed?

Kyrett did not attack Izoin. He did the opposite. He took her broad shoulders in his hands in a way that made it look like he almost expected those shoulders to be slimmer and more delicate. He stared into her eyes. His stare was clouded over and softened as he looked at her.

His voice, usually calculated or whimsical, or sometimes both at once, took on a new tone. It was a near whisper, breathy and calm, and the way he used to speak with his wife.

"Gress... you have no idea how long I've wanted to..." And then he stopped. He paused for only a moment, but as soon as he had cut himself off, he was in motion again. Kissing Izoin. His arms snaked around her toned waist, thinking it was someone else's. Convinced that his kiss was received by a willing and reciprocating Gress instead.

It was enough to make Gress wonder how easy it would be to kill herself with the metal wall decoration. *Or maybe I can gouge my eyes out and make it quicker.*

But she didn't let her dry laugh escape at her musings. After all, if her eyes were on the end of a stick, she wouldn't have been able to notice that for a moment, a single moment about seven seconds into the kiss, Izoin's power flickered. While it didn't break the illusion she had set in Kyrett's eyes, it allowed Gress to see what the man saw.

Izoin's illusion made her look like Gress, but it only cloaked her in his vision. Just like the candle that was disguised as a mug.

Ever so quietly, Gress shifted out from under the bed and stood at the other end of the room. Both Kyrett and Izoin were too focused on their moment to notice.

One low voice growled the word that easily snapped both of them out of their focus.

"Beta."

Both Kyrett's and Izoin's eyes locked onto the woman in the corner whose eyes were dark with a glare. "I knew it. You're Beta."

At first, Kyrett did a double take between the two versions of Gress, and he was prepared to defend that he was no longer possessed by Beta, but then the reality of the situation set in once Izoin dropped her illusion and matched Gress' calm glare with an angry scowl.

Kyrett refused to meet Gress' eyes out of shame, so he looked down and to the left through the corner of his vision. Gress had to note that he looked like an honors student getting in trouble for the first time. However, she couldn't drop her deadly gaze for his sake just yet in case Izoin got the impression that she wasn't so intimidating after all.

"Don't bother asking how I knew." Gress snarled in her same, monotonously low tone that she used to scold particularly troublesome students. Your face right now says I was correct. I'd suggest you step away from that man unless you want to end up like your wine did over on those curtains, hm?"

CHAPTER 24

Gress stood still, unwavering, as Izoin snarled a few choice words at her. After the demon had finished grumbling, however, it seemed that both had to have been statues as they stared each other down.

Gress didn't intend to fight Izoin. She intended to get Kyrett out of there, then knock the demon out. From there, she wanted to throw Izoin in the trunk and wait until after the wedding, where she'd get some answers from the evil spirit and hand her off to Kyrett to let him have the final say on what would be her fate.

Izoin's plans weren't so clear. She needed Kyrett for something, but Gress had no idea what it could've been for. Izoin already had all the freedoms of the strongest demons. She had all the power she needed or even wanted. Gress didn't know if there was anything Kyrett could give the woman that she didn't already have.

Therefore, as each tried to figure out how they'd approach taking down their enemy, they stood completely still and silent.

That silence remained until Gress uttered a command to Kyrett, who, while he was reluctant to oblige at first from the lingering haze of being drugged, must've known it was in his best interest to do whatever the woman told him to.

"Kyrett. Stay outside the door. If you hear Daraegys, it means I need you to come back in."

Even as the man left the sunlit room so he was just watching from outside the door, Gress didn't remove her eyes from the glare they were locked into with Izoin. She had noticed through Izoin's actions that the demon was rather impatient, so Gress knew that it was only a matter of time before the evil spirit snapped and made a rash move. She was going to use that to her advantage, she figured.

She was correct. Beta did make her move first. But unlike an attack of some sort like Gress had expected, Beta had created an illusion. It was a simple illusion that made the room look reversed, but Gress knew that it would make it difficult to move around if she had to calculate each step to make sure she didn't walk into the bureau or the working desk by accident.

However, she stayed as still as ever, hoping Beta couldn't tell that she was fazed by the illusion. She didn't want to attack the demon. After all, her mission was a combination of self preservation and simply knocking her enemy unconscious. In the end, Gress' plan was simply to have Beta wear herself out so it would only take an easy hit over the head with the wall decoration.

After Beta's illusion finalized, it seemed that she, too, was back in her still position. It was as if she was waiting for Gress to make a move.

"Try again," Gress ordered. She hoped to enrage Beta by refusing to strike until the right moment.

A curtain rod suddenly swung towards Gress' head. She didn't move. If it was the real curtain rod, she might have been knocked unconscious herself, but she was betting on the fact that it was an illusion since the curtains still hung as usual. And so it was, leaving the woman untouched.

"How careless. Try again."

Beta hissed through her clenched jaw and stood up taller. Despite her irritation, she was still more calm than Gress wanted her to be.

This time, Beta pulled a compact mirror from within the bureau that Gress thought was on her side of the room. The demon pulled out one of the mirrors, broke it into a sharp point, and threw the handful of shards at Gress as if they were throwing knives. Each of the two

women stood where they were still, as if they thought moving would be a sign of weakness.

The mirror is real. Beta had to throw it herself and it's refracting the illusion as it passes through the air. That means it has to be a physical mirror and not some crap illusion.

Gress sent Daraegys' power into the wall decoration that was still clutched in her hand, but she did so only long enough for Daraegys' eyes, head, and mane to form. Not enough time had even passed from this moment to the time that Daraegys went back into Gress for Gress' body to have fallen unconscious. Due to this fact, Daraegys had been able to see the path of the mirror on a different angle, bite the piece of mane on her right side, and return to Gress all without disrupting her body where it stood.

Because of the bite in Daraegys' mane, which she felt not as pain but as exhaustion in the right side of her body, she knew when she snapped back to attention that she had to move to the right so the shards wouldn't hit her.

She braced herself as she dodged into a desk, rather, the illusion of a desk, to avoid the shards. The desk wasn't there. She didn't let the relief reach her expression.

"Is that all?" Gress asked Beta coldly.

Beta threw the remainder of the compact to the floor.

Gress glanced at her map quickly. Once again, she gave an order to Kyrett through the door. "Judging by their speed, Rerell and Teki are on horseback. Listen for them and follow them. If the rest of you can get out safely, I can stall Beta until the wedding is over. After all, we should be in close enough proximity to James' place that Teki and I will remain in range."

"Gress, you can't stall Beta. No one can stall Beta for long."

Beta wasn't going to let Kyrett escape. She didn't have the ability to make her illusions into physical manifestations, so she couldn't use them to surround him without him guessing that they were illusions. Instead, she used the ability that had caused Teki to think James was being held hostage.

"Kyrett! Please stay where you are..."

The voice belonged to Casady. Kyrett walked back, as if in a daze, back to the master bedroom.

"How...?" Kyrett mumbled, the rest of his question inaudible to Gress.

Gress still remained like a statue, but she couldn't help but worry if Kyrett was going to fall for Beta's trick. After all, he seemed desperate to be reunited with Casady. She had witnessed his desperation trying to consume him in the past, in quiet moments and old photos and silences that lingered for a little too long.

Therefore, what Kyrett said surprised her. "How dare you try to use Casady against me?" His voice was dark and shook in disbelief and anger. "Gress, forget your self preservation mission. I want Beta gone once and for all."

Gress sighed in irritation and glanced back towards Beta.

"I have an offer to make," she decided. "We'll have a contest. Whoever makes it out of this building with..." Gress searched for an object. She pried the cursed stone on its ribbon around her neck, thankful that Teki must have been too preoccupied to stop her this time. "With this rock. Whoever makes it out with this rock will win. If you win, you can take Kyrett for whatever you want. If I do, you let us go and use the knowledge you've gained as a demon to stop Teki's powers from *offing* me when she gets married."

Beta frowned for a moment in consideration. She knew she could easily escape the building with the stone. She had used it as a hideout for years, and Gress had never been there before. Of course, Beta didn't know about Gress' map, so she was confident in the fact that she would win.

"Fine enough. I'm not in the mood for a fight anyways. It's been too many years and, while I hate to admit it, I'm out of my prime. But that stone isn't going to be our target. I think... the dog will be. A moving target is always more fun."

Gress knew that Beta hadn't had the chance to affect Marlon yet because he had been left outside with Daemon earlier and he was now with Clerski. Therefore, she accepted that condition. She clasped the ribbon back around her neck absentmindedly, forgetting for a moment the damn thing was cursed.

"And how would we know if the other has reached the outside?" Gress asked.

It was Kyrett's turn to step in and he opened the door to intrude. His rose-colored eyes gleamed brightly behind his glasses. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to use my powers again..."

"Gonna possess us, are you?"

"Not at all, Gress. Something better. This house doesn't have running water, but there's a stream close to here."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Beta hissed.

"Both of you. Hold out your arms."

Gress and Beta reluctantly held their arms out to Kyrett, who put a strange sun-like mark on their wrists with the power from his Shield heirloom band. Then he input commands into them. "Dissolve only when the owner makes contact with stream water. If one has dissolved, the other symbol's owner must have their soul exhausted."

Gress grimaced at the tingling pain that the glowing pink sun emitted while the commands were being coded into it. Her body must've not registered it, however, because Beta felt the same thing and no wound appeared on Gress' wrist because of it. She figured the pain reached to her very soul itself.

If I lose, my soul will be exhausted? What the Hell does that mean? I was hoping that Kyrett would have helped me cheat by making my mark do nothing, but it looks like he's still out of it from the drugging and playing fair for once...

Gress wondered if the mark was like the ones Norris made in the sense that they wouldn't be transferred to Daraegys, but she realized that those ones simply tagged the body while Kyrett's marks tagged one's spirit. But was Daraegys her? Was she Daraegys? They were one and the same and yet they weren't. She didn't care how that affected her unless it gave her an advantage.

"The stinging will go away soon. Just ignore those marks before you get to the stream," Kyrett reassured the competitors. "I've placed a different one on Marlon that will keep him from leaving of his own volition. One of you two will have to be the ones to lead him out of here."

"Any other rules?" Gress asked.

"None. Just use whatever you can to win. That includes any abilities, allies, or whatever you find in the mansion."

Beta looked at the mark on her arm and scowled. "Kyrett. Your power is the one that is deciding this match. If you help either one of us, the deal is off. You will stay in this room to make sure you can't do anything, got it?" she demanded. Gress had to admire that her opponent was fair, at least, though she knew she couldn't count on Kyrett's help anymore even if he did snap out of his haze. After all, she didn't want the deal to be off, because that would mean Beta would change their terms back into those of a traditional combat. Gress knew she couldn't beat Beta in a fight.

"One more thing," Kyrett mumbled. "I have to get to a wedding tomorrow. You both have until sundown to finish this or both of you will lose. I will come back after the wedding to collect you from the mansion if that is the case, and I will decide what to do with you both from there."

Gress exhaled loudly in annoyance. This was just too far. What about the fact that the wedding would kill Gress? Did Kyrett not consider that? She wished she could stall until the medicine was out of his system, but she knew she had no time.

Beta sneered. She didn't think she was going to lose, certainly not to the woman who was nothing more than a mortal counterpart to a weak evil spirit such as Draecyon. In fact, she was almost excited for the challenge. If she managed to absorb even a small amount of Daraegys' power, she could transcend even the ranks of demons and become the spirit of Death itself. She decided she would rather have that happen in a competition instead of a battle that would last five minutes at most.

Originally, she was going to use Kyrett’s Shield powers to raise her power level past those ever documented before (which was the reason she had held him hostage), but she realized that she now had an opportunity to do so with the powers of the spirit Daraegys.

As for Gress, she had more to lose and less to gain. If she did win, however, she could use the knowledge of the strongest demon to let her break away safely from Draecyon's influence.

"Hmph. This is..."

"...Taking too long? We should get started before sundown," Beta grumbled.

"...Pretty damn ridiculous," Gress finished.

"It is four o'clock. The sun sets at nine," Kyrett called, standing at the doorway of the master bedroom. "You have five hours before the sun goes down. Begin!"

CHAPTER 25

Kyrett moved away from the doorway when a clock a few rooms over tolled four times. Matching the bells, the glowing marks on the competitors' wrists pulsed, stinging their owners. "Glad to know I don't need my watch," Gress grumbled. She tried to walk out the door, but she found that she couldn't move.

"Every hour, the number of bells that toll will freeze you for that number of minutes until you remove the mark, in case you need to consider the time you have remaining. In four minutes from now, you both will be freed and you will be on your way to your end goal, getting the dog Marlon to the stream."

He absolutely wants to push us to our limits, Gress realized, shooting a deadly glare towards Kyrett. *Is this the only way he thinks I can win? He does know more about Beta than I do. I must act as if anything he's imposing on us is secretly to take away Beta's advantage.*

Beta found herself immediately bored with being paralyzed. She entertained herself by creating illusions beside her, but she couldn't settle on anything for more than a few moments.

Gress made a small *tch* sound at the frivolous illusions, but she wasn't going to tell Beta that she couldn't make them. She didn't want another reason for the demon to dislike her. The illusions irritated Gress nonetheless.

Beta knew that Gress was pissed off by her illusions, so she gave Gress an illusion pen to chew on. It was almost a sign of a four minute

truce until the competition began. That, or it was a sign of a mutual irritation at Kyrett.

The first minute and a half had passed this way, with the competitors seeing each other as more of allies than they saw Kyrett as one. Gress considered that this was Kyrett's way of taking some of the edge off of them and getting them into a different mindset. Maybe he was making it harder for each to outright kill the other instead of focusing on their game.

Right up until the third minute had passed, Gress kept checking her map to make a note of her friends' position. She watched Marlon's dot carefully. She was glad to see that Teki's dot had turned green, a sign that the other woman was now asleep.

Out of her own growing boredom, Gress tossed Daraegys into Beta's watch for less than a second, which was enough to allow Daraegys to set the time five minutes ahead without having the watch change shape or having that strange soul leave her completely. She wouldn't remember that she had set Beta's watch ahead, but it sure would piss the demon off when it seemed that the pulse would be late tolling, leaving her to wonder if it could get her at any moment.

The final minute dragged on uneventfully. At the end of it, the pink sun-shaped marks pulsed again and unfroze the two. Kyrett stepped out of the way of the door.

"Remember," Beta growled at him. "You stay here until I'm out of this mansion."

"You say that like you think you're going to win."

"You're giving me five hours to catch a dog. Of *curse* I am." Beta tossed a glance at Gress, whose eye twitched at the curse mention. Beta paused and then dramatically corrected herself. "Of *course*. Of *course* I am."

Beta stormed out of the room, but Gress waited for a moment. Her eyes were dark and her hands were in her pockets. "I want to speak with you."

"You need all the time you can get, Gress. Go find Marlon."

Gress' shoes clicked against the floor, which alerted her to how thin the carpet was. It was a small detail that bothered her. "Look, Kyrett. I’m not mad. Did you know Beta drugged you? That’s why you’re out

of it. Nevermind that. I understand you're not... *lucid* right now, and it may be a good bit of fun for you to pit Beta and I against each other, but..."

"Yes?"

I think I'm going to die, Gress thought. Instead of voicing this thought, she muttered, "Nothing. Forget it."

"You don't think you're strong enough, do you?"

"My soul is on the line and I'm walking into a fight against Death."

"You're not facing death, Gress."

Gress shook her head and pulled a paper out of her pocket. It was the one she had her abilities scribbled onto, but she was showing the page to Kyrett for another reason. It was from a copy of a textbook that she knew from her Classics research, and the paragraphs told of a rumor that demons could transcend further by absorbing certain types of powers. Once they transcended, they'd become the Grim Reaper, the spirit Death.

"Read this. Beta probably wanted you for your powers. The problem is, she won't need yours if she gets ahold of mine. Kyrett, I wanted a competition and now you've forced me into a death match against Death herself."

"You're mad at me, aren't you...?"

"I am." Gress paused. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. I don't want you to have me mad at you the last time you see me. I'm going to stay here until I can think clearly."

Suddenly, Gress punched Kyrett in the stomach, causing the man to double over. "Point taken, Gress! I made a mistake or twelve!" Then it was his turn to pause for a moment. "...Huh? The effects of the wine and whatever she laced it with are gone?"

"I combined two of Daraegys' powers. One, by making contact with you, you were *held together.* That includes your faculties. Two, I absorbed and neutralized its energies. Now your head's clear so you can think about how to get us out of this mess."

Gress turned around to begin her quest, but Kyrett's voice stopped her again.

"Gress..."

"Hm?"

"Take this piece of the mirror with you. Um... in case you need to check your appearance on your journey. You never know when you might need to see, um, your reflection, am I right?"

"You aren't making sense, Kyrett, but if you insist..." Gress leaned over and picked the shard of mirror off of the floor.

"Good luck, Gress. I hope you win."

"Luck won't help me, Kyrett. But... thanks."

Kyrett thought Gress would leave from there, but she tilted her head to the side, pretended to cough, and mentioned one more thing on her mind.

"Oh, about what you got on with earlier, when you thought Beta was me..."

"Oh my..."

"We'll never speak of it again, agreed? It didn't happen."

"Agreed," Kyrett said. "I hope to see you later, Gress. Don't lose."

Gress nodded her head briefly, and then she stepped out of the room to begin looking for Marlon. On her map she could already see Beta going the wrong way. Maybe luck was on her side after all.

And maybe it wasn't. She stepped out of the master bedroom only to find that the hallway was a jungle, and not just in the sense of the expression, either. It truly was a jungle. Gress looked up as far as she could, but even the ceiling was transformed into a canopy of leaves. "This is ridiculous," Gress muttered. "Beta's trying to stall me. But I just have to follow the map," she reminded herself. "This illusion will wear off when I get out of its range."

She kept going through the jungle, stepping over vines that weren't physically manifested anyways, so it was simply a waste of time to step over them. Yet, because of this, she couldn't see the suit of armor that hung in the hallway, so she walked into it. She knew it not by sight, but by the clatter that it made when it fell on her and by the fact that the matching sword had scratched the cursed crystal as if it was positioned precisely to do so. The sword scratched the black tourmaline's striations, opening a wound along Gress' side. Sticky blood emerged from it as usual. She was glad that she had wrapped bandages beneath her clothes when she was in the library earlier that day.

"Tch. This bloody armor was moved from where it used to be. Is that what Beta used that head start for? Setting stupid traps?" Gress pulled herself off of the ground and tried to ignore her new aching. On the bright side, she now had a sword that she could use if she needed to.

Gress flashed the sword through the light. A small path refracted through the illusion that revealed the hallway beneath it. It was just a sliver of clarity, and Gress likened it to using a lighter instead of a flashlight when the power went out, but at least she knew that the sword refracted illusions the same way that the mirror had when it had been thrown at her earlier.

She used the sword to feel the path before her to make sure no more obstacles were in her way. Upon checking the map, she found that Marlon, Clerski, and a sleeping Teki were farther away than they had been, though they had stopped for a break at the moment. Beta was in the basement, presumably in an attempt to retrieve Ross to help her track Marlon. Beta didn't know Ross had already been rescued.

The illusion, like a real jungle, rose in temperature until Gress couldn't bear to keep wearing her mohair sweater. She kept wearing it anyway in the hopes that she would find Casady's old storage room so she could change into something lighter later.

Or at least she figured she'd find somewhere of the sort. After all, the mansion was an old summer home used by Kyrett's family (which would explain why their horses were there) so there was no doubt that a few closets here and there would still hold summer clothing.

That thought was put on hold when Gress noticed a small stream from the corner of her eye. *Kyrett said that this mark would wash off in water. Even if it is an illusion, it's worth a shot to try it.* Ignoring the vines and almost unnaturally large leaves that blocked her path to the river, Gress made her way over to the water and held her breath. Without being careful, likely due to her sense of curiosity at whatever the outcome would be, Gress lowered her wrist to the stream...

Damn it! Gress backed up and stumbled backwards. She knew that what she felt was an electric shock. It ripped through her body painfully. *But I'm not supposed to be able to get those...*

She lowered her wrist into the stream again. Once again, she got a terrible electric shock. While she knew that it wouldn't be a good idea to get another shock still, she decided that she had to test it again if she wanted to figure out why she wasn't neutralizing the energy.

Again, she lowered her wrist to the water. This time, however, she found herself focusing on her power, whatever that meant to her. Maybe it was calling out to Daraegys in her head. *That's ridiculous. If she's me, why do I have to get her attention? My attention? Whatever.*

When she focused, she couldn't feel a shock. She could only feel a slight tingling around her hand. "So I have to actively focus on Daraegys' powers for them to happen. I guess the first time was a fluke, or instinctive, or some other crap like that. Daraegys, goddamnit, if you're me, try to be around when it matters more often. Pay attention or it'll kill us both."

As another test, she rammed her clenched fist into the hilt of the sword. The electricity zipped through the blade. Yet again, she rested her hand in the electricity (which came from a few exposed wires beneath the illusion of a stream) and shot the electricity through the sword. *This might have been useful if we were in an actual combat,* Gress thought. She decided to get up again so she could continue on her way.

It wasn't long before the hallway ended on the map and the jungle receded with it. Once again, Gress could see the true nature of the building. She was relieved. Though it was just an illusion, Gress couldn't help but let the heat and the pesky bugs piss her off, and evidently, throw her off of her game. Even if Beta was on the wrong floor completely, at least she didn't have to deal with bothersome illusions that took ages to progress through.

Yet, Gress had to feel grateful. She was out of that illusion and she didn't have to face another one for another hallway yet from what she could see. She just hoped that Beta didn't have any long range abilities.

Then a sound echoed in the new hallway. The sound was that of a phone, and Gress stood next to a small desk with a rotary phone sitting on it.

Out of habit, she picked it up. If she hadn't been feeling out of sorts from the jungle illusion, she would have quickly noticed that the phone

line was cut, but she didn't pay attention to it after her last experience. It was only 4:18 PM, so she figured she had time to answer a quick call. She thought it could even be Clerski casting a message to her or Kyrett secretly helping her after all.

"Hello. Gress Rendal here. I can't talk for long, but I can take a message and call back later. Who is this?"

"Gress, it's me, your mother. I have bad news..."

Gress nearly dropped the disconnected receiver.

CHAPTER 26

Gress' mother's voice echoed through the phone, sounding just how it had when Gress last heard it two years ago.

Gress shook the voice from her head and slammed the phone into the solid wall. Beta wouldn't know it, but Gress' mother was living safely in the time that Gress was from. Maybe her mother was around in this time, but Gress hadn't gone to find her. In her own time, her mother thought her daughter had disappeared and grieved her as best as she could. Gress didn't know how all this time travel shit worked or if the movies and TV were right about it, but she didn't want to ruin her mom's perfectly normal life by encountering her in *this* time.

That was to say, the fact that the voice sounded the same was exactly why Gress knew it was an illusion. Gress' mom would be younger in the era Gress lived in now. Her voice wouldn't be the same at all.

Gress took out her unrivalled fury on the rotary phone so she could keep a clear head for the rest of her journey. She kicked it from the table and smashed it to pieces.

She briskly brushed the dust off of her clothes. Another glance at her map said that she now had to go one floor above to intercept Marlon. *I've been wasting too much time. I keep forgetting that I have to bring Marlon to the stream once I get him without letting Beta steal him from me first. Finding him is the easy part.*

Taking only a moment to figure out her route, Gress decided that she'd go two staircases over and then turn left to get to her allies. Once she had her mind made up, she didn't waste any time rushing past the first set of stairs and continuing to the next. She frowned when her shoe almost broke through the first rotting step.

"Give me one fucking break," she snarled, leaping over that step and onto the more stable second one. With purpose in her stride, she dashed up the winding staircase with her eyes trained on the top step.

She was halfway up when she saw a familiar face peek around the corner.

"Oh, thank goodness! I thought you were Beta! You sure had me frightened there, Gress," Clerski sighed. Much to Gress' relief, Marlon was with her, as well as Teki, who was lying asleep on one of the four horses that Clerski had dragged along.

"I'm even more relieved to see you, Rerell," Gress commented, though she was glad that Clerski didn't know the full meaning behind her words.

"Come on, then. How about we get out of this dirty mansion? Oh, I'll never get all of the dust out of my hair. It’s grody to the max in here!" Clerski rambled on for a minute before asking, "Where is Kyrett? You managed to get to him, right?"

"Yeah. I did. Come on." Gress tilted her head downwards so the shadows of the light that peeked through the cracks in the wall would hide her eyes from Clerski.

The white-haired woman adjusted her glasses and got Vince to start walking beside Gress.

"Hey," Gress suddenly asked. "Has Marlon been doing well?"

"He's been a little distressed, and he's been trying to go after Beta a few times, but he's healthy still. Why?"

Gress frowned. When she looked at the dog, she couldn't deny that his fur had started to gray more and he walked slower than usual. She flashed the sword's blade in the light beside Marlon to make sure it wasn't an illusion.

"What kind of dogs were those damn dragon hunters breeding for Norris? Forget it. Arthritic or not, we’ll get him out of here.”

“Gress?”

Clerski noted that Gress kept looking behind her shoulder. Combined with her odd questions, Clerski was concerned for Gress' condition.

"Is something wrong, Gress?"

"I have to get Marlon out of here before Beta can get to him. It's, uh, something Beta came up with." Gress didn't want to explain to Clerski that she had bet her life and her soul on a competition just so she wouldn't be beaten to a pulp, so she left it at that. "Don't go looking for Kyrett yet, he's being held in the master bedroom for now. Beta's not there, so he's safe."

"But we can't leave without him!" Clerski said.

"You're not. I am. I have to take Marlon out of this mansion."

It was then that Teki woke, or rather, revealed that she was awake.

"You made a bet with Beta, didn't you?"

"Hm. I did." Gress tried to conceal the fact that she was bothered by the fact that Teki had been awake and listening to her through her mind. "You have to stop using our connection to pry into stuff. How much do you watch through me? That's crass."

"If *someone* would tell us what's going on, I wouldn't have to!"

Gress glanced at her watch. It was now half past four.

Teki encouraged Gress to share the details of the contest with herself and Clerski through a bit of gentle demonic persuasion. Gress kept it brief, only explaining the necessary parts and leaving out the bit about finding Beta with Kyrett in the master bedroom (if she explained it, she knew that Teki would never let her live it down and Clerski would take it the wrong way) and only going into detail regarding the competition's rules.

"And there's one more important thing."

"What's that?" Teki asked, almost proud of the fact that she had channeled her strength enough to influence Gress even when both were awake.

"Don't possess me unless I give you permission, Teki. That one's more for my peace of mind than anything else."

And so, Clerski and Teki were caught up on everything.

Gress looked down at Marlon. "Come," she commanded to the dog who wasn't wearing even a leash or a collar to, as Gress put it, drag

him along by. She figured that if she couldn't keep him from wandering off like Clerski had mentioned, she'd just have to pick him up and carry him over her shoulder.

The old dog sniffed Gress' hand and stared up at her. He didn't move.

"Is it because Norris' scent isn't on that tracker anymore? Come on. You know me. Follow me, Marlon."

The old dog yawned, paced in a circle around Clerski's legs, and rested beside her. Teki had to hold back a comment about how Gress could easily handle a class full of students but she couldn't get an aging mutt to obey her for a minute.

"I don't think he wants to listen to you," Clerski pointed out.

"I'm aware of that. Hold on. I can convince him to join me easily."

Gress took a deep breath to prepare herself for her transformation, and then she cast her soul into the black tourmaline around her neck. The stone curled and twisted in the air, growing a head, then the dragon-like beast's sturdy body, and ending with the wings, legs, and tail. Two dark eyes stared at Marlon, ignoring Gress' body, which lay unconscious on the dusty, rotten wood.

"Hey. Dog. You want to stay in here, do you?"

Marlon glanced up at the fearsome creature.

"I figured you wouldn't. Here's the deal. You're going to follow the woman that's on the ground out of here without looking for Beta. Why would you want to do that? It's simple. You've been cursed and we both have until nine o'clock to get to the stream. You don't want to join your master, do you?"

Marlon's eyes lit up for a moment, as if recognizing the reference to Norris, but then his dusty brown tail went between his legs and his ears folded down.

"I figured you wouldn't. Just stick close to me."

The dragon-like beast's dark body began to fold in on herself until her soul was back in Gress' body. Gress' eyes darted open. "Rerell. Teki. Did I convince him to follow me?"

Clerski stepped away from Gress as the black-haired woman sat up, then returned to a standing position. "You did. You don't remember how... scary you were acting?"

"Not a thing. What did I say?"

"It's best not to tell her," Teki hissed in a rushed whisper to Clerski. "Or she'll start talking to us the same way."

"Sorry," Gress mumbled. "I'll try to keep Daraegys in line next time. Can you two keep Beta busy for a minute or so?"

"If it means we can get to my wedding, whatever you say," Teki confirmed. She tugged Centauri's reins and the white horse stood at attention.

Gress turned on her heel and continued walking quickly down the hallway, hoping that it would take only a few more minutes before she reached the staircase that led to the first floor. Marlon followed obediently, although he was slow and he shook nervously. His shaking reminded Gress of Norris' curse. *Whatever I threatened him with really shook him up. Now I feel bad for hauling Daraegys out to do the dirty work for me.*

Still, she slowed to a pace that Marlon could walk comfortably in an effort to appease the dog a little bit. "Hey, Marlon. Ignore whatever I said, okay...?"

Marlon's brown eyes lit up again and his tail even wagged for a brief moment. He even ran ahead of Gress to show that he was making an effort. *He really is Norris' dog in personality. Suck-ups, both of them. I see how those two got along.* Gress quickened her own pace to join Marlon.

When she reached the staircase to the first floor, another illusion swept over Gress. Unlike the jungle, which was easy enough to travel through with the use of a map, this one made it near impossible to even see the map. The staircase and the room at the bottom was surrounded in a blinding white light.

"This is bloody ridiculous," Gress growled. She held up her arm to try to block the light. "I can't see the steps..."

Just to be safe so the old dog Marlon wouldn't be blinded by the illusion, Gress removed some unused bandages from her jeans pocket and wrapped them over the hound’s eyes. "You're going to have to listen to my footsteps, okay, Marlon?"

Marlon whimpered, but his ears perked up. Gress, however, wasn't sure if she would be able to walk far enough to make any footsteps for

him to follow the sound of. After all, if she took a single step, she could fall over the winding staircase and Beta wouldn't have to worry about stalling her any longer. She considered using Daraegys to fly over the stairs, but she was sure that she'd end up hitting her head on the ceiling if she tried to fly blind.

"So, this illusion has stopped you in your tracks? Here's a secret. The jungle was intentionally easy to make you feel a false sense of calm. The only danger was a trap I had set with some wires, but it seems you've avoided it. Oh well, this one will keep you here for a long time." A snarling voice purred at Gress. Gress recognized it as Beta's voice. She still couldn't see the demon, but she was sure that Beta planned to take Marlon and carry him out to the stream.

A desperate howl from Marlon confirmed her suspicions. At least Beta had the decency to drop the bandages that had been over the dog's eyes back at Gress' feet, but Gress figured that could have been a sign of disdain from her newly winning opponent instead of a friendly gesture. As she leaned over to pick it up, the sun on her arm pulsed again. This time, it pulsed five times.

She could barely see the silhouette of Beta, who had been frozen the moment she reached the ground floor. The demon was glancing back at Gress. She sneered at Gress, her eyes piercing the teacher. Gress sighed. She had to admit, that sneer was well deserved. She had lost Marlon to yet another illusion, she didn't have the sword to refract it, and she was now bent over in a rather compromising position. She hoped that her back wouldn't be too pissed at her for the rest of the competition after the five minutes were up.

Gress, or Daraegys at least, had one thing that could entertain her for the time she would be paralyzed. Just as Beta had turned back towards her and became frozen in place, her arm had raised to frantically check her watch. Daraegys' trick from an hour ago had worked.

If she, a simple antimatter dragon spirit, could get a trick over on a demon that was a step away from becoming the demon Death, she had to be doing something right. And to be doing something right, she was a step closer to leaving with her life.

CHAPTER 27

Beta became impatient as she waited at the door. She had nothing else but the time on the clock to blame for why she couldn't leave the mansion. Her illusion didn't affect her. Gress wasn't even close to overcoming her power. Yet, she was still restricted by something so simple as the changing of the hour!

She would have created another illusion to help her pass the time, but that would put Gress on the same playing field that she was on. She was already pissed off at herself for allowing herself to fall so far behind after she went to retrieve Ross (only to find she wasn't there), and she wasn't going to dissolve her only advantage. She would rather be bored for three more minutes, she decided, than to let Gress have a chance at leaving with that dog.

As for Gress, she didn't mind the wait after the first two minutes had passed. She could easily use that time to consider how she could get rid of the illusion. She still had the mirror, but she knew that it was too small to reflect enough of the illusion. Even if she tried to use it, the light would only be sent back at her eyes. *I won't use the mirror yet,* she decided. *Maybe I can throw myself down the staircase and hope that I land at the bottom safely.*

After that, she was left counting the seconds, feeling grateful that the hour had changed when it did, giving the woman some time to

figure out how to catch up to Beta. She also, despite her aching back, was glad that she had tried to pick up the bandages when she did so her eyes would be shielded by the rest of her body from the unnaturally bright light.

Four minutes had passed. Then it was four minutes and thirty seconds. It wasn't long before Gress had to confront Beta.

Then the mark pulsed again, sending the two rivals back into motion.

Gress tied her unused bandages around her own eyes, took a quick, deep breath, and mumbled about how ridiculous her situation was. Then she tossed her body down the staircase. Her jaw clenched when she hit the first set of steps. The impact against the old, splintering wood sent a sharp pain through her side and knocked the breath out of her.

She told herself that it would be worth it to catch up to Beta. She threw herself down the next section of the staircase by motivating herself with that kind of logic. "Beta," she groaned. "When I catch up to you, I'll give you what you deserve for making me humiliate myself like this." Once again, she crashed down a few more steps, landing painfully on her right side.

She threw herself carelessly down the last set of steps and stood up again. She looked back to see through the weave of the bandages that the illusion was now fading behind her. Beta knew that she was past the staircase.

As for Beta, she still carried Marlon, and she had made it out past the doorway. She was now in the small clearing where Gress had parked the blue sports car. Beyond that clearing, she had to pass a small stretch of forest before she got to the stream, though the path to the river was a steep downhill climb that would be difficult to travel while holding a dog.

Beta dropped Marlon and created an illusion of a cage around him. She hoped that it would prevent him from wanting to run away while she was dealing with her transportation plans.

She glanced at the sports car, but she doubted that it could hold up on the trip down the large ditch. As well, she was sure that it would be a hassle to deal with Daemon, who she could see from her peripheral

vision. The boy was still talking to his plant. Using an illusion to disguise her presence, she slipped into the car and removed the glass bottle from the center console.

"He shouldn't be a problem," Beta muttered to herself. She stormed back into the mansion.

"Gress!"

Gress tilted her head to the direction of Beta's voice. "Beta. Didn't guess you'd be back yet."

"Do your Daraegys thing!"

"Hmph, you're just going to absorb my power. I've been trying to keep my use of my abilities to a minimum to keep you from getting them."

"I'd reconsider that, Gress. Unless you want me to drop this bottle here..."

Gress didn't remove the blindfold. She knew that as long as she trusted the map and didn't look at her surroundings, Beta's illusions couldn't mess with her. However, because she didn't know which bottle it was, or what was in it, she didn't know how important it was. She just figured that Beta was going to cast glass along the floor where Gress couldn't see it.

"That won't make me feel any more threatened than I've already been, Beta."

Beta frowned and walked behind Gress, holding the bottle carelessly in one hand. While Gress couldn't see Beta, she knew that the demon was behind her due to her ability to sense whatever was behind her from the length of her dark hair.

"Take that blindfold off and use it to become Daraegys," Beta commanded, shaking the bottle of dust beside Gress' ear. Gress refused to move. She stayed as still as a statue even when she realized the bottle was Norris' ashes.

"You're not going to drop it."

"Of course I will. There's nothing for me to lose. Do as I say, Gress."

"Hmph." Gress clutched the shard of her mirror in her hand. She started to transfer her soul into it, and as the reflective surface grew and changed shape, the illusion was distorted by the beast's body.

Daraegys stood just in front of Gress' collapsed body, though now Beta was the one who couldn't see Gress.

Daraegys was using her ability to absorb energies combined with the mirror's reflective tendencies. She was absorbing the very light that reflected from the mirror body. Without the light reflecting back into Beta's eyes, Beta couldn't see Daraegys at all.

The beast wrapped a shining tendril of her split mane around the Beta's neck. This caused the demon to throw the bottle at her, but Daraegys kept it intact by catching it with the other tendril. After all, if she had an ability to keep things from breaking on contact, she was going to use it at a time like that one.

"I told you. You're not going to drop it."

Without a moment of hesitation, Daraegys pushed her wings downwards with enough force to pull her body into the air. While Beta had to take a moment to recover from being choked by the mirror beast, Daraegys took that time to repeatedly attack Beta with the shards of mirror that fell from her wings. She even collided her body into Beta's to make sure the demon wouldn't leave unscathed.

But she knew when Beta stood tall and still in the middle of Daraegys delivering her blows that she had made a mistake in letting Beta's taunts with Norris' bottle get to her.

A voice echoed in Daraegys' head. *'Gress, stop. She'll get your energy. Look, I slipped a piece of paper into your pocket earlier. It's something I want you to have, something very important. But... if you really do think you'll lose, I want it to be my parting gift to you…'*

It was Kyrett's voice, cast as a thought by Clerski. The beast heeded the message, although she decided it had been rather too busy in her head as of late.

Despite Kyrett's warning, it was already too late for Daraegys to back away from Beta.

"That's enough. That's enough of the power I needed!"

Beta forcefully grabbed onto Gress' body and Daraegys' neck and dragged both parts of the woman out into the clearing. The sunny sky turned overcast. Beta's body almost had a shining quality to it now that she had begun her transformation. Marlon, out of terror, tried to slam

into the side of the cage in an effort to escape only to learn that the prison was nothing more than an illusion.

Gress pleaded with Daraegys to go on some form of autopilot to return the bottle to the car for a brief moment before waking. She didn't want it to get damaged in the moments ahead. Gress knew that Beta was going to become Death. Even the eerie silence that pierced through the clearing and the surrounding forest told her that she was correct in her assumption.

Then, once again, she was paralyzed. This time, it wasn't out of a power freezing her on the change of each hour, but instead it was out of a fear unlike any Gress had experienced before. She wanted to run. She couldn't convince herself to move from the spot. "Damn it," she growled.

Beta was surrounded in a brilliant darkness, a shadow that glowed brighter than Gress had even seen light shine. Then again, she had never witnessed the transcending process of a demon before.

From the radiant darkness emerged two large wings, each of which had to be at least five times as long as Gress' entire body was tall. The wings were clear as they formed, only taking their black shade when they were complete. However, Gress made a note of the wings in particular for one reason. The rest of Beta was wrapped in thick shadows so it was impossible for Gress to see anything but those wings.

The next thing to pierce through that darkness was the bright glowing of Beta's eyes. The demon now had shimmering gold eyes that seemed to stare into Gress' soul. After the eyes, the next thing to appear was an arching golden scythe in Beta's hand.

"Gress. I no longer need to rely on possessing mortals for energy! Instead, nature and accidents will do my work for me! You've been a fun opponent so far, so I'll save you a good seat in Hell!"

Finally, the shadows settled and Beta was revealed. The new Death had the same appearance as Beta Izoin, but it had a luminescent quality to it that previously was not there. Her short black hair that wrapped smoothly around each side of her face were unaffected by the wind stirred up from the great wings parting. Two angular black horns extended from her head, tipped in shining gold hues. The demon

floated in the air without even having to move her wings. A long black dress swirled around her in the disturbed currents of the air.

Gress noticed that the scythe was made by controlling the shape of blood from an injury that Gress had sustained on the stairs. *But I never lost that much blood, which means my it's blood wrapped in something else.*

"Soul energy," the new voice from Beta echoed. "It's blood encasing your soul energy. If it touches you, I get to take you for my kingdom of the dead!"

Gress didn't want to be forced to fight Death. It was bad enough fighting when her opponent was simply Beta Izoin. However, she had read enough and taught enough about this spirit to her class that she knew one very important thing that Death did not.

The scythe could not kill anyone who was not fated to be taken at a given moment. Even though it held her soul energy, the most it could give her was a scratch.

"Sorry, did I say it was your energy? Pardon me for my error! The energy I have in this scythe is Draecyon's which I gained from Teki's bond with you, which I do believe you are not allowed to touch..."

So Death can read my mind, too.

"I can read everyone's mind now, Gress. I bet you're thinking about the time that Kyrett possessed you in the hotel, and how you couldn't get anything by him?"

"I was thinking of that. I had been trying to come up with some clever way to break his control. The difference is, don't need to think of any clever tricks to find the dog," Gress hissed. "It's now about who can catch up to him before we reach the river."

Death frowned and flicked her wrist. Her scythe evaporated. "Your determination will look good on you when you become Hell's gatekeeper. Oh, that's right. I've decided I almost like you enough to keep your soul around. Don't worry about it being exhausted by Kyrett. When I win, I'll come back to bring you underground."

"I don't know if that's a damn compliment or if you're mocking me. But when I win and you tell me how to free myself from Draecyon, I'll make sure to have that crazy man pull some strings for you."

Death's frown grew.

“Kyrett would never,” she spat. “You’re lying to me.”

"Don't you get it? If you do end up helping me, it won't be a problem for you to stick around. You have nothing left to strive for, so you won’t be a danger. We’ll both get what we want if you let me win."

"Damn you, taunting me like this..."

"Beta. The only thing getting in my way is your bloody ambitious nature. I guess I can't be any more than just a little pissed off at that, though. Not enough to ruin your life."

Death clenched her jaw. Without another word, her vast wings carried her off towards the ditch that led to the forest.

CHAPTER 28

Gress knew she couldn't catch up to the demon by running. She also knew that if she sent Daraegys after Marlon, she'd still have to go back to pick up her mortal body and carry it to the stream. But she did have one mode of transportation that could possibly get her to the dog before Death reached him.

In the chaos of Beta's transformation, Teki and Clerski had shown up at the doorway to witness the process. They had their own horses as well as two more.

"Rerell. Any chance I can get on one of those horses there?"

Clerski led Vince down to Gress and left the other horse where it was. "Of course! That's why we brought them, in case you needed one when trying to rescue Kyrett. Which one do you want to ride?"

"Which one's faster?"

"Strike is faster, but he's harder to control. I'd suggest taking Kyrett's horse, Sheldi."

"I'll take Strike."

She walked back up to the door of the mansion, where she mounted the dark stallion. "Just one question," she said.

"What's that?"

"How do I make him go?"

Gress Rendal had never ridden a horse before.

"How could you not know how to ride a horse?" Teki asked, obviously irritated at Gress. "Better question yet, how could you think

it's a good idea to chase Beta on one when you've never been on a bloody horse?"

"Do you see any better way to chase her? Tell me how to make him move."

Teki and Clerski gave Gress a quick tutorial on how to ride the stallion, but by the time they had done so, Death was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared into the forest. Because of this, Gress was rather reckless when controlling the horse, bringing Strike to a gallop right away before she had gotten used to keeping him in line.

"How do I make him turn right?"

"Pull the reins to the left," Clerski ordered. "And guide him with your foot at the right side."

Gress followed the commands, but Strike still didn't turn to avoid the fallen log that was in Gress' way. Instead, the bold horse jumped over it.

"Damn it. He's not listening to me, anyways..."

Strike picked up speed, sending a jarring feeling of impact through Gress each time the horse's hooves thumped against the ground. Gress hoped that the careless speed would be enough to catch up to Death before Marlon was found.

Once again, Strike jumped instead of turning. The horse's jump carried him over the ditch and he landed perfectly on the other side. Except, Gress didn't land with him. She fell off of Strike during the jump and her body crashed into the ditch with yet another jarring impact.

She picked herself up out of the dirty ditch and climbed up the side of the raised ground. Strike grazed on the few tufts of grass that poked out of the ground. "Hey, are you going to listen to me this time?" Gress asked though clenched teeth, shooting a scowl at the stubborn stallion. Strike gave a snorting noise back to Gress.

Gress brushed the soil from her clothes and mounted the horse again.

As she prepared to chase Death again, a blur of brown caught her eye at the edge of the forest. Marlon was running frantically, and he was running back towards the mansion.

The demon stood at the tree line with her long wings wrapped around her like a cloak. She didn't take her eyes off of Marlon.

Gress wondered why she wasn't flying after him. She got an answer just a few moments later.

The demon cast an illusion over herself, similar to the one that she had tricked Kyrett with. Gress froze. Death now had a new appearance. Pale skin, black hair that twisted into a large curl around the right side of her face, a long, narrow mouth, and a certain pair of glasses, of which the lenses were tinted in light blue.

The demon had taken the appearance of Norris in an attempt to lure Marlon to her. She even used her power to cast voices to beckon the dog.

"Marlon, my dear. Could you please come over here for a minute?"

Sounds just like her, too.

Gress whistled a low note for Marlon in the hopes that he'd follow her due to whatever Daraegys had told him earlier.

Marlon stopped and tilted his head towards the fake Norris. His eyes lit up and his tail wagged furiously, as if it couldn't keep up with his excitement. Then he looked back towards Gress. His tail stopped wagging.

"Thanks, Marlon. I like you, too," she sarcastically growled.

Teki directed Centauri down to where Gress was, and luckily Marlon hadn't moved in the few minutes it took to get there. "I can persuade him to come over," she suggested.

"Go ahead. Just get him to follow me and ignore Beta, okay?"

"Got it. If it takes getting a dog to a river to get me to my damn wedding, I'll give the mutt any command you want."

Teki focused her powers on Marlon. "Come over here and follow Gress Rendal, Marlon. Don't pay any attention to that demon over there, no matter what form she takes."

She paused for a moment. "It's not working!" she huffed. "Kyrett's bloody power is blocking it!"

"Damn it," Gress muttered. She motioned for Strike to go after Marlon.

That must've been the last straw for the dog, because he bounded away from the horse and its rider and went for the fake Norris instead.

Gress brought Strike to a gallop. She knew there was no way the old dog could outrun her young, energetic stallion.

Just before Marlon leapt towards the demon, Beta changed shape again by lowering her illusion. She no longer looked like Norris. The dog quickly turned in the other direction to see that the horse was still after him. In the time he took to make his decision on where to run, Beta had spread her long wings and flew over to him, lifting him into the air.

Gress noticed that Beta was flying low to the ground, presumably doing so because of the added weight of the large dog keeping her from going higher into the air. *If I get this horse to run as fast as he can, I'll be able to pull Marlon from her arms,* Gress thought to herself. She hoped that Beta was too focused on flying to have read her mind.

Beta arched around and flew into the forest. She did this for two reasons. The first one was that she had to get past the forest to get to the stream. The second was that she knew Gress would struggle with getting Strike through the densely grown trees and the overgrown brambles.

She looked at her watch. It read six o'clock.

In reality, it was only 5:55, but Gress' trick made Beta feel a sense of uneasiness. Did the power already hit Gress? Did it not affect her? Or was Kyrett's power set to five after the hour? Beta had to be annoyed at herself for allowing her transformation to take so long, either way. If the power froze her, it could be at any minute that she would crash to the forest floor with her wings outstretched and Marlon free to leave her grasp.

As it was, Marlon was already struggling to break free. Beta sank closer to the ground in her effort to keep a hold on the dog. "If only Kyrett wasn't keeping us from possessing this damn mutt," she hissed. "When did he get so powerful? I thought a quiet life would’ve made him weaker. He hasn't had time to train at all!" Her grip loosened and she checked her watch again. "I bet it was when he went back in time. He probably spent some time using his powers on his students or the other teachers..."

Beta's head shook as if shaking the thoughts from her head. "I can't let that distract me. I must be immune to his power now, anyways!"

It was when she thought this that Gress crashed into the forest on her horse. Strike reared upon being confronted with the tightly packed trees.

That moment was also when the hour changed again.

Gress froze like usual, and due to the fact that he was carrying the one who was being affected by the strong power, the horse froze as well. She had to wonder if maybe that could have been meddling on Kyrett's part so she wouldn't fall off the horse again. After all, when Marlon was in close proximity to her an hour before, he didn't end up paralyzed like she had been.

"He's helping me, after all. I guess I can't be mad at him for that."

She expected Beta to be frozen with her, but when she looked ahead, she saw that the demon, while slowed down, was not frozen where she was. Luckily, as she could not fly fast enough to propel herself through the air between the trees, Beta was forced to land. She still held tightly to the tuft of fur on the back of Marlon's neck so she wouldn't lose him again.

Instead of continuing to the river, she arched her wings behind her and materialized her scythe in her hand again.

"Gress Rendal, it's been a fun competition. But, you see, I have nothing to gain from winning anymore, after I've already transcended from your power. I'm afraid that I might just end up running out of time and it would be a shame to lose my soul by letting you continue the contest."

Gress clenched her jaw. She could see Beta as the demon walked behind her. She was aware that Beta had figured out about her sense of knowing what was at her back, and she knew because of it that Beta had decided to make her final move from behind on purpose.

Because of Beta's slowed movements, each moment was worse for Gress when she sensed the exact location of the scythe as it got closer. She almost wished that Beta wasn't slowed. Knowing where the blade was had almost the same effect as seeing it in front of her.

"Beta. There's no need to do this now. Wait until I'm unfrozen so it'll be worth bragging about. If you take me down while I'm at a disadvantage, you'll just look weak."

Beta frowned and brought her arm closer to Gress, regretting that she had held it back so far to begin with. She hated the feeling of being slowed down. She wanted to be able to transcend all other powers! How could she let herself be hindered by someone so simple as the high school teacher that she had once possessed?

She had used that man, when he was a professor, to gather everything she needed for her transformation except for a power that could allow her to finally transcend. She wasn't going to let him have a late comeback through his coworker! She was going to prove a point to him by defeating that woman Gress, even if it did mean she had to let his power get to him for now. Therefore, she had to either wait until the six minutes were over or until she brought the scythe down to connect with Gress.

But Gress was already one step ahead.

"Beta. I told you. If you don't back off, you'll just look weak. I can't think of anything else to say, so I'll just go ahead and break whatever suspense you're trying to build. And maybe a few bones along with it. Is that okay?"

Gress cast Daraegys into the black tourmaline again and wrapped a large dark tendril of mane around Beta's wings, pulling the demon away from Gress' still frozen but now unconscious body. She lifted Beta off of the ground.

"I'll let you in on a secret," Daraegys started. *"I don't like heights. It's not that I'm scared of falling from them or anything, I just don't like them. So when I see you using these damn wings to fly around with and help you get to the stream through the air, it leaves me a little irritated. It sounds ridiculous, but it makes me want to..."*

Before she continued to speak, Daraegys took the demon Death's wings in her crystalline, fox-like jaw and twisted them in an unnatural position. A sharp cracking noise could be heard from within them. *"Beta. Consider this a lesson. Don't try to knock me down with that scythe again."*

Then Daraegys discreetly set Beta's watch another ten minutes ahead. According to her own, she only had to wait two more minutes until she was free again.

Beta slowly recoiled and the scythe dissolved.

She focused dark shadows into the wings, healing them instantly, and grabbed onto Marlon. She moved just out of Daraegys' reach. The dragon-like beast wasn't bound by the Shield's paralysis like Gress was, but if Daraegys left Gress' side it would leave the mortal body open to attack. If Beta stayed in reach, she surely would've had her wings snapped again, if not worse.

But Daraegys didn't want to finish Beta off. She needed Beta's knowledge to remove Draecyon's connection to her. Therefore, with Beta out of her reach, there was simply nothing she could do except to return to her body and forget what she had done.

CHAPTER 29

The extra minute added from the waiting time of the previous hour seemed longer than it should have to Gress. She hadn't recalled the past minute or so. She figured that was part of the reason why the wait felt longer. Lost time could be anything.

Teki and Clerski had, by that time, gone back into the mansion and then came out of it again with something. Gress, turned the other way, couldn't tell what it was because they were too far away.

So when she finally sensed a third figure riding a horse with her two friends, she could only figure that Teki had convinced Daemon to abandon Ross for a moment and he was now watching the competition unfold with them.

She didn't expect that the one who rode Sheldi down the first slope was the mare's own owner, Kyrett. She wouldn't have expected him simply because of Beta's command that Kyrett had to stay locked in the mansion until one of the two competitors returned.

"Teki, Rerell. I was hoping that Daemon and Ross would have joined you by now, but Ross is having trouble with her mask so neither of them can help Gress here. So, I guess I'm breaking the rules by being here, but technically the fact that Beta can move now, even if it is only slowly, means that rules no longer count."

"I think the rules were made invalid before that," Teki snapped. "Are we going to exterminate this bloody demon or not?"

"Here's the problem," Kyrett sighed, shaking his head. "We can't kill Death. Now that Beta is all-powerful, we can only limit the demon's movements. Beta cannot die. Nothing can stop her for long. Whatever happens here, the contest is stacked. Gress will lose."

"We can make sure she gets to the stream first," Clerski suggested. A look of worry spread across her thin face. "Unless..."

"Rerell. There is no stream. One of them *will* have their soul exhausted at nine o'clock. I was hoping that Gress would have already been forced to confront Beta and have slain that demon by now, so I got careless and I let my power do the talking for me. I can't take that power back. S-sorry."

Gress was oblivious to the information that was shared between Kyrett, Teki, and Clerski at that time. Therefore, her goal remained to look for the stream at the other side of the forest in the hopes that she would have Marlon with her when she got there. When the six minutes of paralysis were finally over, the first thing Gress did was to throw herself from Strike's back.

Her body thumped against the brambles below and shot a sharp stinging sensation through her side. Now that her body was capable of moving, her curse caught up to her and slashed her across the back where Beta's wings had been broken. Unfortunately for the woman, her own wounds did not heal like Beta's had.

This caught the Death demon's attention. "Oh? You still have that curse of yours?" Beta paused and walked directly in front of Gress. "If you won't let me use the scythe, I suppose I'll just have to satisfy myself with that curse for now."

Beta picked a fallen twig from the forest floor and used a rock to sharpen the end of it into a point. "I don't think it's difficult to figure out what I'm going to do with this, Gress," Beta called back as she dragged Marlon with her again. Gress stood up and ran after her, carefully avoiding the tall trees and making sure she didn't get caught in any bushes or brambles.

It was then that the demon dragged the sharpened twig against her skin, making sure she didn't sustain any cuts of her own but analyzing Gress' reaction to each injury. Soon enough, she had figured out just how much pressure to put on the stick to make the biggest slash across Gress.

Gress said nothing. She couldn't say anything about it. If she did, Beta would have made it worse, so she silently gritted her teeth and put up with her new cursed wounds. Once again, she was glad to have

the bandages already wrapped around her so she wouldn't have to stop to treat her injuries.

She kept chasing after Beta in the hopes that the latter would give up on exploiting her curse soon.

"Gress, there's a log in the way. I can't fly past it. Clear it for me, would you?"

Beta sneered at Gress and held the stick to her neck.

She's going to blow my neck apart if I don't do as she asks, Gress thought. She snarled a *tsk* and sent Daraegys into the log for half a second. The wooden dragon flew out of Beta's path before returning to Gress.

Beta lowered the stick and raised her wings again, lifting herself and Marlon above Gress' reach and over the forest's canopy of treetops.

Gress didn't think she would be able to catch up to Beta again. Wherever the stream was, Beta would be there before the last three hours ran out. Gress knew that she would probably spend the last three hours getting through the forest.

"I can send Daraegys after them if I get desperate. But with all these wounds, I don't have enough energy left to send Daraegys out for long..."

Gress shook her head. As she did so, she leapt down into an empty riverbed in the hopes that it would lead out of the forest.

An empty riverbed.

Gress stopped in her tracks. The words in her head struck her in a way that made her go over them in her mind. Then it hit her: the riverbed was empty, and it was the same riverbed that connected to the stream.

If Gress' guess was correct, it would mean that there was no stream left. Either Kyrett hadn't known that it had dried up or, more realistically, he had set them both up.

As if her body was on autopilot, Gress walked through the rest of the riverbed shortcut over the next thirty minutes. It led her, just as she had suspected, to where the stream had been.

There was no stream. There was no way she could win.

But, she figured, she didn't have to let Beta know that.

Just as she spotted the demon flying overhead, Gress had an idea. While there was no stream, there was still water nearby in the form of the moisture in the air. *This plan is ridiculous. I don't even know if it will actually work,* she thought.

She figured that she had just enough energy for Daraegys to take one more attempt to summon the demon close to her. She had to wait until the hour changed again, but if she succeeded in her plan, it would be worth it.

Her plan was simple, as she set it into motion. She would wait until the overcast sky became rain. According to the weather and the moisture in the air, the rain would come before the hour changed. Then she had to wait for the paralysis so she could lay her arm in the empty stream. Finally, at the change of the hour when Gress figured Beta would see the riverbed, she would send Daraegys into the rain and rest the beast, which would be built with water, in the riverbed. From above, it would look like Gress was at the stream.

She hoped that Beta would try to dive into the stream in a reckless effort to win.

If Beta charged into Daraegys, thinking she was the stream, Gress would then use her ability to absorb the demon's energy. From there, she would take Beta back to Kyrett. She didn't know what she could do from there except hope that he found a way to turn off his powers.

So Gress stayed at the edge of the riverbed with her arm extended into the dirt. She waited.

Beta flew over the empty riverbed at the time that Gress expected she would. Gress stared into the riverbed, looking for the first drops of rain to hit the dusty ground.

But the rain never reached the dirt.

"Gress! You forget I can read your mind! I knew your plan before you even had the details worked out yourself!"

Gress exhaled quietly. It was time for a new plan.

"Beta. You said something important earlier."

"Hm? What was that? Does it have anything to do with what I'd do to that damn teacher if he cheated?"

"Precisely."

Gress locked eyes with Beta, who had her wings spread above Gress so the rain couldn't fall anywhere near the woman below. The riverbed would remain dry.

"Beta, you said that the competition would end if Kyrett gave either one of us an advantage."

"I hate to tell you, but the stream being dry puts both of us at the same level of disadvantage. It doesn't bloody count."

"I'm aware that it doesn't."

Beta was irritated at both Gress and Kyrett, but more so at Kyrett, so she was hoping that Gress was just as pissed off at the man. Unfortunately for the demon, Gress wasn't mad at Kyrett. She was just going to use him, the same way he used her to try to get rid of Beta, to end the contest before nine o'clock. Since it had already taken nearly three hours out of the five she had to work with, however, she decided that in order to get back to the mansion on time, she would have to pull some sort of underhanded trick to get Beta out of the way.

And she knew just the right trick to use.

She didn't think too much about her trick so Beta wouldn't be able to latch onto her thoughts. She didn't even need to think about it. *Daraegys* would.

Daraegys had the ability to absorb energies.

Gress had come across many types of energy in those past three hours. Electricity from the jungle trap, illusion energy from Beta, the energy of a transcending demon, and even Kyrett's odd energy from his mysterious metal ring. Each of those energies, at that time, would've made good weapons against all but the demon Death. However, Daraegys didn't intend to use any of those energies.

There was one other energy that she could use to knock Beta out. *I wish I had gone with a traditional combat instead of a competition,* she thought when she quickly made up her mind on her next course of action.

The energy Daraegys would end her conflict with was the very one that brought her there in the first place. She would target the cursed healing crystal's energies directly at Beta. After all, she figured that Beta couldn't heal every part of herself at once.

"Beta. I'm going to bring you back to Kyrett now. This competition is over."

"I told you that the stream doesn't affect one of us more than the other. Are you that desperate, Gress?"

Gress didn't respond to Beta's words. The edge of the forest was silent except for the beating of the demon's wings in the air and the rain that loudly crashed down onto the ground. Gress pulled a mirror from her pocket, along with a piece of paper.

"Kyrett told me to use this if I was absolutely sure I couldn't win. You wouldn't have known that, though, because he got Rerell to send those directions to me when you were busy with your transcension."

Even Gress didn't know what was written on the paper, but that meant Beta wouldn't know before it was revealed to her, either.

She opened it up to find the last thing she expected. Four simple words. *"You shouldn't know about this."*

However, in her mind, she forced herself to think these words instead: *"Reading this will lift my power."*

"Hm, so he released you from his power? He was cheating, after all! I knew it... he always cheats at cards and I spent enough time around him to learn his ways..."

Gress had used Beta's distrust of Kyrett to her advantage.

She knew she couldn't win, so she would have Beta call off the contest instead.

"Gress. This competition is no longer valid. The deal is off."

Upon hearing those words, Gress looked up towards a tree nearby. The white wyvern Clerski was perched in it. "Rerell. Did you get that? Send that sound file to Kyrett."

"He has it. The contest is now over," Clerski said.

Gress stared at Beta again, locking eyes with her and shooting a glare.

"Beta. Now that the contest is done, there's nothing to stop me from knocking you out with this stone and hauling you back for an interrogation while everyone else goes to the wedding. I was hoping to see the wedding, but I'd rather miss it and live to see Teki go on her honeymoon. There's nothing for you to lose, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

CHAPTER 30

There was a silent minute between the two, the Death spirit and the Classics teacher. Then Gress turned back towards Clerski.

"Take Marlon back. Tell Kyrett that I might take a while to get back because I wasted all my energy on this stream trick. Tell him that I'll bring Beta back with me."

Faced with the words and a glare that told her of her coming demise, Beta remained calm. There was nothing left that she could do to keep Gress from winning in the end, after all. "It's okay," she muttered to herself in a voice so low that no one else could hear her. "I got what I wanted. To be forced to give this woman what she wants isn't a punishment. For a spirit of her low level, she sure did stall me for quite some time, and I can't say I don't respect that."

Gress addressed Beta briefly. “I don’t care why you did all this, but if you want to tell me so you feel better, do whatever you want,” she said.

Beta hesitated, but she obliged. “I became a demon years ago. See, my name was supposed to be Betta, like the fish, but the priest who baptized me wrote it down wrong. I didn’t know for years, but when I found out, I tracked him down and killed him. Made sure he knew why. That act turned me into a demon. I hid myself for many years, but that family of aristocrats, the Arlots, their research put my life at risk. That wife particularly nearly sealed me away forever. The rest is obvious. But if I became Death, I could be more than a demon again. I wouldn’t be Beta, I would be Death.”

“You did it for a name? You know you can just be Betta, right?”

“What—”

“They have paperwork for that. If you stayed in our original era, you wouldn’t even have to go through the courts. Obviously you can change it.”

Humiliation struck Betta and she failed to hide it. She changed the subject.

"Knock me out already and go to the wedding. I don't need any of you now that I've become Death, but if I remember correctly, you need me to help with your curse or something like that. Go on, if you can knock me out, I'll do whatever you want me to do."

"Betta. I didn't expect you to say that. Much less accept that I won."

"I got everything I wanted, didn't I? Don't push it, Rendal."

"Understood."

Gress plucked the cursed crystal from the ribbon on her neck. "One more thing."

"What do you want?" Betta asked. "Hurry up and try to knock me out."

"You can't die, can you?" Gress asked. Betta shook her head while wearing a frown of confusion. "Good. Because this might've killed you if you hadn't transformed, and I need you to not die."

The pounding rain subsided and Betta stopped flying. The spirit landed in the empty riverbed in front of Gress. "You'd better do this quickly. It'll take at least until nine o'clock to get back on your own."

"Right."

Gress reached out and held tightly to Betta's wing. She took a deep breath. As she exhaled slowly, she crushed the cursed stone in her hand. She was afraid that Daraegys' absorption powers wouldn't work and she would be instantly killed, but there was a pause, she opened her eyes, and... nothing had happened.

"Transfer," she commanded, though she didn't need to. She said it as a warning to Betta rather than for her own benefit.

Hundreds of wounds opened up in the form of gaping shadows across Betta's body. As her body struggled to heal itself, it used so much of the Death demon's energy that Betta quietly slipped into unconsciousness.

"Glad that went well. I was afraid I'd have to bring her back in pieces," Gress mused to herself. She began her long walk back to the mansion, carrying Betta's unconscious body over her aching shoulder.

She wanted to believe that her troubles with Betta signaled the end of the rest of her troubles, but just like she had to walk for hours yet, she had to get Betta's help when the demon woke. She still had to get to the wedding. She still had to go home and hope that her substitute had been good enough to her classes over the last five days. She still had to face the students and staff who had known Norris, as the school's own Nurse Odile, and explain to them that she wasn't returning with the rest of them.

It was as if she hadn't accomplished anything in those five days. She had lost more than she had gained, and all to get her evil spirit to her wedding. Gress longed for when she'd be able to say that the strange journey had finally ended. *Two more days*, she told herself. *If everything goes well.*

For now, she could only track the empty riverbed back to the old, rotting mansion. Gress looked at her watch. It was 7:45 PM.

"This is ridiculous. I won't get back until ten o'clock."

The sun went down at nine o'clock, just as the blond man had said it would. Kyrett stood at the mansion's porch and stared out over the rotten steps.

"Rerell. Is there any sign of her?"

The woman with the long white hair adjusted her glasses again. "The answer is the same as when you asked two minutes ago, Kyrett. I still don't see her. I don't know if she defeated Beta after."

Clerski taped another page back into one of the old, destroyed library books. Beside her, Daemon rested next to a fire. Marlon slept beside him, exhausted after the long day of being a pawn in the strange capture the flag contest between Death and a high school teacher. Unfortunately, Daemon had passed out before he could fix Ross' mask. He tried to fight exhaustion as long as he could, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Kyrett kept watching for Gress.

"It's a shame she hasn't returned," he muttered. "She has to be on the way back. I'm sure she'll be back soon."

"Come in here and sit down. I've started a fire in the old fireplace, so you should sit by it while you wait for her."

Kyrett sighed, frowned, and turned his head towards the open double doors.

"If she shows up and sees that we're not here, she might give up before she reaches the door. I want to be here when she gets back from the forest."

"You really should come inside," Clerski insisted.

As stubborn as always, Kyrett still refused to go indoors until he was sure that Gress was on the way back. He even suggested that he should look for her on his own, but Clerski didn't like that idea as much as he did.

"It's nine thirty. I'm going to go find her."

Before Clerski could stop him, Kyrett went around the back of the mansion to the second entrance to the stables. He pulled his horse's tack from the wall. It was only a matter of minutes until he was riding the mare Sheldi out into the dark forest.

"Gress! Can you hear me?" Kyrett's voice had more than just a hint of desperation in it as he called out to the missing woman, hoping that he would get an answer instead of the empty silence that came back to him.

It was ten o'clock when he reached the point where the forest got so dense that he couldn't get Sheldi through it on horseback. Slowly, he got off of the palomino mare and led her along by the halter. There was still no sign of Gress.

"Hey. Turn around."

Kyrett turned around quickly. A dark shadow on the other side of the empty riverbed locked eyes with him. It was Gress, riding atop the black stallion Strike and still carrying an unconscious Betta's body across her shoulder.

"Gress? What happened to you?"

"You never told me that the pink sun mark would still get me at nine, so my damn soul was exhausted for a while. Then I had to go back for Strike."

When Gress said her soul was *exhausted*, what she meant was that all of the energy had left her soul, leaving her body in a coma-like state until it slowly returned. It was the same effect that Kyrett's Shield had on him when broken. She should have considered that he might need to remove the mark in person, but she still wasn't impressed. Her entire being felt tired and almost sluggish even now that she was awake again.

"Anyways, there's nothing I could do about it. That's why I'm late."

When Gress had finished speaking, Kyrett pulled her off of the stallion and wrapped her in a hug. "I'm glad you're safe!"

"Hey. Kyrett. Let go of me. It was hard enough mounting that bloody horse the first few times. I need to get back on him before he runs off again," Gress grumbled. She didn't return the hug at first until the taller man gave a gentle sigh of relief.

"I was so worried, Gress," he breathed.

Kyrett expected Gress to make a quick remark or chide him on getting carried away with his powers, but instead she just fell forwards into his arms. Gress had fallen asleep.

"I suppose you would be tired after all of this. Come on, I'll carry you back."

Kyrett led Sheldi and Strike back out to where the forest trees were sparse again. Then he mounted the mare, carrying Gress with him, and tossed Betta onto Strike's back. "Give her a rough ride," he told Strike. He still wasn't going to be kind to Betta, even if Gress had been.

The rain had started again by this time. Kyrett rode back to the mansion through the muddy ground and the wet conditions. While his own blond hair was now thoroughly soaked through and falling over his face and his glasses were rippled with the heavy stream of water, he was glad that he had removed his silver jacket to cover Gress up. He didn't care if Betta was hit by the rain or not. In fact, it satisfied him that the demon was left in the rain while his friend was shielded from it.

Kyrett lost track of the time on that trip. He just followed the riverbed and the moonlit trails that he had taken his family through in what would be the future to everyone else. He heard thunder roaring in the distance. It mixed with the thundering hooves of his horses. "We're getting a storm overnight," he noted. "I hope it's gone by tomorrow morning."

He kept riding through the mud and the rain until he reached the mansion once again. He brought the horses back to the stable and left Betta in there with them. When he pushed the wooden double doors open again, he was almost unrecognizable to Clerski. When she saw that he had her friend wrapped up in his jacket, she breathed her own sigh of relief.

"Finally, some good news," she sighed. Her narrow face was set with a look of concern and tears that hadn't fully dried.

"Oh? What happened while I was gone?"

"Wilt *wilted*."

Another clap of thunder burst through the mansion. The holes in the rotting wall allowed the flash from distant lightning to peek into the house.

Kyrett frowned. For the longest time, he refused to speak, and when he spoke he did so hesitantly. "Is there any chance Daemon might wake soon?"

"I believe he will. He's stirred in his sleep a few times."

"Rerell, make him some tea. Put something in it for him. I don't want to break the news to him until the morning."

Clerski obediently followed Kyrett's orders, leaving the living room first to enter the kitchen and then to find the medicine cabinet. She brought the tea to Kyrett, who laid it beside the boy's head.

Kyrett couldn't help but stare at the wilted flower from the corner of his eye. "Maybe," he called to Clerski. "Bring one to me, too."

Clerski brought another cup of laced chamomile tea to Kyrett. He sniffed at it for a moment, sat in the old, rotting red armchair, and rested the cup on the table beside him. He couldn't decide whether or not he wanted to commit to drugging the rest of his night away.

Both Clerski and Kyrett listened to the rain that pounded against the sides of the mansion. "Where's Teki?" Kyrett asked.

"I reconnected the rotary phone for her. She's calling James. If you need to find her, she's upstairs."

"Oh, okay. I just wanted to make sure everyone else was indoors. How about Norris' bottle?"

Clerski subconsciously clutched the silver cross around her neck. "On the mantelpiece. I thought she'd be safe there for now."

"Oh, that's good enough. Well, I'm going to go to sleep until all of this is over. If Gress wakes up, don't tell her that my tea is drugged. It'll concern her too much. Ah, forget it. She'll figure it out in that way she always does."

Kyrett sniffed the tea apprehensively once again, then took a sip of it. His shoulders slumped, his head tilted forwards, and his eyes fluttered closed behind the glasses that slowly slid off of his face and into his lap.

Clerski collected the teacup and returned it to the old kitchen. She found herself staring out the window towards the dark and rainy sky. Another flash of lightning. Another clap of thunder. The rain continued to thump against the outer walls, threatening to break them.

Clerski found that, even in the five short days, she had felt like she had aged a few years. "All of this is finally catching up to me," she decided. She poured the rest of the tea out the window. When she had finished with the teacups and she had cleaned the tear stains from her glasses, she picked up an old book and returned to the living room to continue taping the ripped pages back in.

CHAPTER 31

The storm continued through the night.

Daemon woke about an hour after Kyrett returned, but the tea sent him back to sleep before he could ask anyone what had happened.

Teki didn't stay on the line with James all night. She went to bed shortly after she was finished upstairs, but she thought that no one else was awake (because Clerski was being so silent that Teki thought she, too, was asleep) so she decided she needed a good night's sleep before the day of her wedding.

Marlon woke and sat beside Clerski through most of the night. She was glad that the dog was keeping her company as she kept repairing the damaged books. He even rested his head on her lap each time she found that a book had a few pages missing or irreversibly damaged.

Everyone else continued to sleep. Clerski was left to repair the books on her own, except for her friend's faithful dog. But, she noted, Marlon wasn't much help with that. It wasn't even like he was a real service dog. He was trained to hunt and track, not to sort things or pick up books for her.

"Rerell Clerski. You were in his class back in university. You figured out that I was possessing him at times, especially during the night, and you defeated me with the help of that Miss Norris, Kyrett's family, and even that Daraegys."

Betta had found a way out of the locked stables.

"Anyways, it seems you and the dog are the only ones up."

Clerski noticed that Betta was now wearing one of Kyrett's extra sets of clothes from one of the drawers upstairs. It fit her perfectly, and it made her look incredibly smart, although it contrasted the black Death dress from earlier. There were two slits cut in the back of the shirt, vest, and lab coat for Betta's wings.

“Can I speak with you? I won’t cause trouble.”

Clerski took her eyes off of the damaged books and turned them towards Betta. "You came to ask what Kyrett's going to do to you, didn't you?"

Betta tugged at the gold ends of the black hair that framed her face well. "Do you... know what his plans for me are?"

"If I was Kyrett, in this situation, I'd have you taken in for killing the wife. After all, it was your power that caused it. I'd find some way to frame you or another."

Betta frowned and anxiously adjusted her tie.

"But," Clerski added. "If it was up to me, I'd banish you to somewhere that had no one for you to possess and nothing you would be able to harm."

Betta didn't want to go into any sort of prison or solitary confinement. She wondered if her good *friend* Gress would show her any more mercy than Kyrett or Clerski would.

"What brought you up from the stables?" Clerski asked. "I thought they had been locked up well."

"I came to get Ross Bastet. Her soul has been waiting for me to carry her out for hours now; I had to break out to get her." As she explained this, Betta leaned over and lifted a spirit that Clerski previously couldn't see from its former spot resting beside Daemon. The spirit of Ross, not her cat-like form but her human one instead, rested carefully in Betta's strong arms. Ever so gently, she touched her soul energy scythe to Ross' forehead.

The shimmering form of the girl dissolved into the air and faded away before it had reached the old ceiling.

"I'll go back to the stables now."

Betta turned to go back to the cold stables, with her wings trailing on the ground behind her. Clerski, knowing as a wyvern (and having

wings of her own) just how sensitive those wings were, flinched to see how heavy they were as they dragged behind the spirit.

But she didn't say a word to Betta about it. She continued to sit in the rotting rocking chair across from Kyrett and started taping books back together once again.

"No, you'll stay here," Gress ordered. She opened her eyes, found that she was lying on Kyrett's lap, and stood up quickly. "I need to talk to you."

"We should go somewhere else so we can give the wyvern her space. And, you know, so we don't risk waking Kyrett."

"What? You scared of him or something?" Gress asked.

Betta didn't say anything. She just walked up the main staircase. Gress followed her, knowing that she was on the way to the master bedroom because it was the only other room in the mansion that had a fireplace that hadn't collapsed.

When they had reached their destination past two hallways and a couple of staircases, Betta dug through a desk drawer, found an old pair of glasses, and broke the lenses out of the frames.

She's doing that thing that the Art teacher, Claude, does. Wearing glasses when he doesn't need them. Maybe for Betta, it's because she has a habit of pushing them up onto the bridge of her nose after possessing Kyrett, who wears glasses, back then.

"Yeah, that's correct," Betta sighed. She pulled a cigarette from the same drawer and lit it with a match. "Want one?"

"Need one at this point. Thanks."

"Here, take the pack."

The silence between Gress and Betta became uncomfortable rather quickly.

"Please don't let him punish me," Betta blurted after a while. Gress noted that she was less irritable than the demon had been over the past two days. In fact, she must've been more afraid of Kyrett than she let on, and it showed through in how she carried herself around Kyrett's friends.

"What am I supposed to do? You held him hostage after possessing him for years. You almost caused the wedding to be postponed due to your piss-poor timing."

Betta cleared the ring of smoke around her head away with a quick flick of her wingtip. "The end," she sighed, motioning to those wings. "Justified the means. I had to do what I did if I wanted to transcend."

"Including tricking him into having a wife in the extra crispy variety?"

Betta refused to make eye contact with Gress.

"It sounds crass when you say it like that. Can't we just say I made him burn her to death? I thought you weren't one for beating around the bush, Gress."

"I'm trying to make you uncomfortable. It seems I'm doing a good job."

Betta puffed another ring of smoke. "Well, that was justified, too. I killed her, but she had scheduled me for a fate worse than death. Does it look like I ever wanted to be a demon? I didn't know killing priests did that to you," she said. She finished her cigarette and lit another one. "You don't know just how powerful the Arlots are. You would've possessed Kyrett in my position too."

"I don't agree with the crap you've done, but it's not my place to call you out on it. But... if you'll help me with my connection to Draecyon, I'll tell Kyrett to go easy on you. How does that sound?"

"Right. Your connection. That's fair enough. Lie down, would you?"

Gress lay on the large bed and stared up at the ivory and gold canopy above. "Betta, tell me how this will work."

"Shut up and don't move. I'm going to sever it from your soul."

Betta pushed her glasses onto the bridge of her nose and tossed her cigarette into an ashtray that she found in the desk. Then she reached her arm into Gress' chest. The woman's eyes followed Betta's other hand as it reached up to hold her forehead.

"This hurts like Hell," Gress muttered.

"I told you to shut up. I'm trying to find a particular part of your soul, so don't do anything that could mess this up. It's not easy dodging the important parts of you and Daraegys, alright?"

Gress gave a small *hmph* noise in protest, but she stopped talking and allowed Betta to search through her spirits.

She glanced around the room through her peripheral vision so she wouldn't have to look at Betta's arm lodged deeply through her chest. She glanced down to see if Betta was finished yet, and she felt disgusted to see that the demon was still reaching into her. The sight was repulsive.

Then the demon pulled out a clear crystal and crushed it. "Done. You're no longer connected to Draecyon. Are you happy?"

On one hand, Gress was satisfied. She had broken her last ties to her own evil spirit. She wouldn't perish at the wedding, she could leave what had been a certain radius around Teki that she couldn't leave before, and she would even be able to stay awake at the same time Teki was without focusing her energy on keeping the overlap. She was free.

But on the other hand, Gress was exhausted and her chest burned with a dull ache. She would have to go back to sleep before morning came so she'd be well rested for the long day ahead. She would have to deal with Betta and Kyrett, trying to satisfy them both without allowing either one to hurt the other. She still had two days left before she could go home.

"Well, I could read your mind if I was looking for an answer. I'm going to go out to the stable again now until everyone else wakes, so you can go back to sleep," Betta said. "Someone needs to look after Sheldi and Strike after they were out in that weather, and I suppose Vince and Centauri would like to be looked after, too. Kyrett needs to take better care of his horses, damn him..."

"Ah. Well… thanks for the help," Gress told the demon just as Betta left the room.

The storm had passed by the time Gress woke next. She knew this by the fact that she was woken up by the sun pouring through the window. She wished Kyrett would have bothered to put the curtain rod up and clean up the room when he was managing the competition.

She sat up and almost instinctively reached for her chest, just to make sure there wasn't a hole left to her heart, but it seemed that when Betta had reached into her, the demon had somehow made the entrance wound intangible.

"It's a good thing it fixed on its own. I was sure I would've had to get some kind of stitches after she reached inside me. That would've been a pain, and probably disgusting too."

Gress changed into a change of clothes that Betta had left there for her. A dark gray sweater and a long black trench coat waited for her. Leather pants that matched the trench coat sat on the pile too. She didn't care that it looked different or that Kyrett would probably ask where she got the new clothes. She just cared that it was clean and dry.

She went past the first hallway, down the second (stopping to put the phone's receiver back on the wall after noticing that Teki had left it hanging down) and she made her way down the main staircase to the living room.

She was glad that everyone was too busy to notice when she descended the stairs. Teki was flustered over just about everything. Clerski was sewing (a hobby she had picked up from Norris) the train of Teki's dress that had been torn by brambles. Even Kyrett was helping the evil spirit on her big day by contacting a professional chef to prepare the wedding meal.

"One of my sons," Kyrett rambled on as he explained what he was doing. "Though, we've been in more than a few arguments in the past, something about me not giving him the credit he deserves. If he starts to get irritated, just remind me to thank him for his work, okay?"

Gress didn't want to go into the excited group just yet. *I'll wait until they calm down,* she thought to herself.

She wondered where Daemon had gone, but she figured he went to pick up the wedding planner in the black sports car. She figured that Ross had gone with him.

Once again, if she didn't want to deal with the noise or the nervous energy, she'd have to resort to talking to Betta again. Gress walked back upstairs, went past the library, and found herself in the stables, where Betta was waiting for her. She had been tied up by Kyrett, almost too well.

"Gress, I was told that I'm not allowed to go to the wedding. I don't mind that much." That last statement didn't sound sincere. "You know, since Teki and I kinda tried to kill each other and I held her hostage."

Gress was silent.

"Either way, Kyrett told me what he was going to do. After the wedding, he's going to have his connections bring me in for, as you put it, giving him an extra crispy wife."

"You want me to talk to him about it, hm?"

"After the wedding."

"So, what do you want?" Gress asked, noting a hint of impatience in Betta's voice.

"Please just untie me. We can go out to the car if you want, but I'm dying for a smoke and I don't want to disrupt the horses."

Gress sighed, rolled her eyes, and pulled Kyrett's letter opener from her pocket, cutting the ropes and freeing Betta once more.

"Fine," she muttered, an almost palpable tension dripping from her voice. "But don't pull any demon bullshit or you're going back indoors."

CHAPTER 32

When everyone else stepped out of the mansion and walked to the blue car, Gress was sitting on the hood of the sports car with Betta. The demon had stretched her wings out and let them catch the wind that breezed through the clearing.

"Gress. You let the demon go?" Kyrett asked. He frowned and locked eyes with Betta.

"It sounds ridiculous, but this bitch saved my life."

"What?" Betta asked. "I'm a bitch now?"

"You possessed a man, made him kill his wife, are the reason I had to give up my home era, and held three of us hostage. You expect to be anything better?" Gress asked in return, though a gleam in her eye told Betta she wasn't being serious about her insult.

Kyrett unlocked the sports car and sat in the passenger seat. Somehow, he could sense that Gress wanted to speak to him about something important. He figured this out mostly by how she refused to keep talking to him about Betta.

"So... I suppose you two are good friends now?" Kyrett questioned.

"Not quite. Gress and I simply had a truce. We had an agreement with each other." Betta slid off of the car and hopped onto the grass. "Well, I'm going inside again now. I'll meet you all at the train station in the city so you can decide what to do with me."

The demon walked back around the house to the outside entrance to the stables.

Kyrett looked up at Gress. "Please get in the car."

"If this is about releasing Betta..." Gress muttered as she slipped into the driver's seat. She didn't get the chance to finish her words.

"Gress, I wanted to give you something, but I guess Beta… Betta? Izoin already gave you a change of clothes." Kyrett held up a small plastic bag. "It's a dress for you to wear to the wedding. It used to belong to Casady, but she, um, doesn't use it anymore..."

Kyrett handed the bag to Gress.

"Thanks."

"You can change into it when we get to James' house. There's no time now, everyone else is ready."

Just as Kyrett had handed over the bag, Teki, Clerski, and Daemon piled into the back of the car. *So Daemon was here, after all. Maybe he had been upstairs, getting his suit ready or something.*

Gress pushed the key into the ignition and started the car.

As she pulled out of the clearing, she glanced through her peripheral vision to see Kyrett frowning again.

"Gress, just because she broke your curse, you can't let your guard down," he muttered.

Kyrett still wants to talk about Betta? Does he think I'm going to let that demon go with a smile and a wave? He forgets that I was almost killed a few times last night. He's being ridiculous.

"I won't," she hissed. "I want to be the one to punish her, myself."

Kyrett assumed that her reasoning was because of Betta's actions, but that was Gress' way of saying that she didn't want Kyrett to get involved.

"You're still mad about the Shield power, aren't you?" Kyrett asked.

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"Only a bit."

From behind Gress, Clerski tugged at the ribbons on her shimmering sunset orange dress. It wasn't to adjust them. It was nervous fidgeting.

Gress turned in her seat to look at Clerski.

"You're going to say something? Go on, say it."

Clerski glanced up quickly. "Well, I was going to remind you that Kyrett carried you home in the rain last night. He didn't mean to hurt you. He really does care, even if he shows it in the wrong ways sometimes."

"Did he?" Gress shot a look at Kyrett. "Well, uh... thanks, Kyrett."

Gress just wanted to get to the wedding so she'd be able to finally get a break, but she was relieved to know that she was around a safe crowd from then on.

James greeted Teki at the door to his house. When he pulled her into a hug, Clerski took it as a sign that they had the right address, so she got out of the car and greeted James. The soon-to-be groom invited everyone inside.

Daemon joined the chef in the kitchen, asking about the future that this Arlot son was visiting temporarily from. Everyone else stood up in the porch at first because they didn't know their way around the house.

"Don't just stand there," Teki ordered. "Go on in and make yourselves at home, would you?"

"Please, I'd be happy to show you all around if you don't know where to find anything," James Gallen said as Teki fussed over his silver hair.

"Is there a bedroom Gress could use?" Kyrett asked. Gress shot a scowl at him. *He's going to get the wrong idea, you idiot,* she thought.

"So she can change into a dress," Teki blurted as an explanation. Gress was glad that Teki had been in her head for so long so the woman knew how Gress thought.

"Of course, honey," James beamed back to the woman who was engaged to him. "You can show her to the guest room if you'd like."

Teki gave her partner a kiss on the cheek in an uncharacteristically kind gesture and tugged Gress' sleeve, still hesitant to touch her in case it killed them both. Gress snatched her hand briskly.

“Curse is broken, remember? We don’t have to avoid each other like that.”

"Right, well, follow me," Teki said. She brought Gress to one of three guest rooms. "Call out to me if you need anything.”

"I think I'll be fine unless the damn dress gives me trouble."

"Hold it up for a second?"

Gress took the dress out of the bag. It was long and dark blue, and small sparkles made it look like there were glittering stars on the fabric. It nearly matched Gress' hair mascara, which she reminded herself to reapply before the event.

"Let me zip up the back."

"Hey, wait, isn't that a little—"

"Close? Don't make me laugh! I used to possess you. You can let me see you changing."

"It's different when you're looking at me and not through me. I'll be downstairs soon."

Teki relented. She slipped out of the room again and left Gress on her own to change into the dress.

Downstairs, Teki returned to find that Clerski was thoroughly reminding James that it was bad luck to see his partner just before the wedding. She rolled her eyes. Some things never changed.

"Rerell, don't you think your bad luck superstitions have caused enough trouble?" Teki mused.

"I wonder who cursed me for that to happen," Clerski laughed back. Anyway, you've already had quite a bit of bad luck," the white-haired woman reminded her, adjusting her glasses. "I wouldn't risk it if I were you."

"Well, it's been a while since I've seen him last!"

Teki was about to explain further when Daemon, acting once again as an assistant to Teki and James, brought a piece of bad news with him.

"It seems the wedding flowers won't be ready in time," he announced.

Clerski glanced at James and Teki. "Told you. Bad luck."

"It's not going to be a formal wedding, anyways, so it should be fine," James insisted.

"Speaking of flowers," Daemon started. "I haven't seen Ross getting ready. Did she say she was going to meet up with us here?"

Kyrett's and Clerski's shoulders tensed, but neither of them wanted to tell anyone else of the bad news before the wedding was over.

"There was a bit of an issue with her health," Kyrett said after an uncomfortable silence. "So she won't be at the wedding."

Daemon hung his head slightly in an effort to hide the worry on his face, but his disappointed demeanor slipped through anyway.

"Oh, I see. I guess you guys did what you could to help once I fainted. Thanks, anyway. We'll have to catch up with her right when the wedding is over."

In an effort to break the gloomy atmosphere, Clerski suddenly exclaimed, "I guess we should get to the church! Come on, everyone. James, you take the blue car. Teki, you take the black one, everyone else can file in wherever there's room!"

"Hold on! My Maid of Honor isn't ready. Wait for her," Teki ordered.

It was at this time that Gress walked downstairs in the dark blue dress. "Maid of Honor? Dear God, Teki, what do you expect of me?" She folded her arms and leaned on the rail, but she cracked a small grin. "Got it. Maid of Honor it is."

The marriage ceremony went by without an issue. It seemed that the bad luck that Clerski had forecasted hadn't showed up after all. It was a small wedding, with only James' family and a few of each partner's friends invited, despite the fact that James owned a large company. Gress figured that he didn't want to make the wedding large for a reason, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

Despite the fact that they hadn't rehearsed, it was as if both Teki and James had studied their lines, what to do, and when each part of the wedding would occur.

Daemon was the best man. He was as unprepared as Gress, so the two commiserated over that briefly and lightheartedly.

Clerski kept Norris' ashes with her through the whole night. "You should be here too," she said. "We all would have wanted you here."

Kyrett helped his son bring out dinner plates to the guests. He made sure to give long overdue praise, knowing that when the chef went home, it would be the last time in a long time they would see each

other again, as it was no longer dangerous for Kyrett to stay in the era he had moved to.

The reception ran long into the night.

At one point, just as the sun had dipped below the horizon, Gress decided she'd take a break from the crowd, the dancing strangers, and the excessive socializing to slip out onto the small patio. She lit a cigarette on a candle and wished it was a pen instead.

The night was calm.

Gress ambled over to the other candle across the patio. She blew it out, enjoying the clear night sky and the stars that reflected her dress.

She had her cigarette in peace.

"At least the wedding went well," she said to herself aloud. Then she returned to the crowd indoors in the ballroom, where she could see that Teki and James were still dancing with each other, as if oblivious to everyone else around them.

"Hey!" Daemon's whisper of a voice contrasted to the shout he gave to Gress, which suddenly got her attention. "It's time to do in James' car!"

This is ridiculous. What kind of crowd am I here with, at all?

Gress smiled again, another barely noticeable upwards tilt of her lips. She wasn't sure if Daemon caught it at first until he gave a grin of his own and motioned for her to join him. "Spare me a can of whipped cream. I'm on the way."

CHAPTER 33

Gress ended up checking into the same hotel that Kyrett was staying in for the night. She didn't have a choice. James' house and the three guest rooms inside had been filled up with the new groom's family and close friends. Gress didn't even know the directions to any other hotels, though apparently Daemon had joined a bunch of his friends to a different hotel.

Therefore, she was stuck with that nearby hotel.

It was the sixth day of their journey, and the seventh and final day was quickly approaching, so Gress didn't bother to find out anyone else's plans before booking a room on her own and leaving the reception.

Almost as soon as she had locked the door, Gress pulled off the blue bridesmaid dress and slipped into the new clothes that Betta had given her. She frowned when she saw that the leather trench coat's shoulder pads had twisted sideways. She paused to fix them before pulling the jacket over her gray sweater.

Just as she fixed her jacket, the rotary phone that sat on a nearby desk rang.

"Hello? Gress Rendal speaking. What are you calling about?"

Of all the unfamiliar voices she had listened to during the wedding meal and the reception, Gress was surprised to hear a voice she couldn't mistake for anyone else's.

"Gress. It's Matsuda calling from the school. I heard you went to look for our librarian Clerski, but I didn't think you'd be gone for so long. Damn it, Rendal. Wanted to check if you’re okay. Arlot gave me your number."

It was the school principal Matsuda from work. He was the one covering her classes while she was away.

"It's a long story," Gress sighed into the phone. "But long story short, we found Rerell. Her kidnapper was a bride on the way to get married. She needed bridesmaids and it turned out both Rerell and Nor— Nurse Odile— were old friends of hers. It's ridiculous."

"Ridiculous? Go on, now, that doesn't sound crazy. No need to sound so nervous to tell me about it. Rendal, you'll be back next week, right?"

"For the start of exams? Of course."

"Hm. Good. That damn Claude wanted me to take your supervision shifts if you didn't get back." Matsuda gave a brief chuckle. "As it is, I've been subbing your classes."

Gress could almost see the man in her mind as he spoke. About 40 years old, he was muscular, tall, and he had short black hair. A long angular face supported thin glasses and a finely trimmed beard at just the edges. She could even remember just the look of his uniform, a gray suit and dress pants with a lighter gray shirt beneath, different than what she or Kyrett chose to wear, but still within dress code.

I should pick up a souvenir for him. He lost the gold pin that he wears on his jacket a couple weeks ago, so it wouldn't be too strange to buy him another one to replace it. Should I get souvenirs for all the staff? That'd be too much hassle. I'll just get one for Matsuda.

"Rendal? Are you still there? You didn't hang up on me, did you?"

"Of course not. I..."

"I don't need an explanation, Rendal. I just wanted to make sure," Matsuda chuckled again. "Hm? Give me a minute. My damn glasses got smudged again."

Gress could hear the man on the other end of the line as he shuffled around, pulled on the fabric of his shirt, and ran the material between his thumb and the lens of his glasses.

"Okay, I'm back on the line. Anyways, I'm glad to hear you're okay."

"I'm fine. I'll be back today."

"That's good to hear, Rendal. Take care, would you? I heard about your incident with that back injury, and I'd hate to see you get hurt again."

"Thanks, Matsuda. You take care too, okay?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll talk to you when you get back. Sleep well, Rendal."

The receiver went silent. Gress placed it back where it belonged and fell onto her bed. Almost as soon as she did, she fell asleep.

Daemon, Kyrett, and Clerski waited in the train station. Kyrett insisted they wait for everyone to show up before parting ways. "Where are the newlyweds?" he asked. "And Gress?"

Clerski glanced around the station. "James said that he would be a few minutes late. He had no idea how long it took Teki to get ready, so they're running behind. As for Gress, I saw her over there now at the gift shop a minute ago. I don't think she's seen us yet."

"Hm? Are you sure?" Gress stood behind Clerski, tucking a bag with a round, gold pin into her pocket. "Sorry. I'm late. I needed to pick something up for a friend."

"Oh?" Kyrett suddenly became curious. "It's for Matsuda back home, isn't it? I think he'll like it."

"He'd better. These things are bloody expensive, you know."

"The pens are a pretty good price, though. I went over there to buy one earlier for my collection." Kyrett's eyes went dark with a glare for a moment. "Gress, if you chew on it, I'll possess you again and no one will be able to save you. Got it?"

Gress whipped Kyrett's letter opener out of her pocket and spun it in her hand. "Will you?" She tossed the blade back to its owner.

Kyrett was about to reply to Gress when James and Teki waved to the group from across the station. They began to make their way over.

"Hey, everyone," James greeted, trying to act more informal than his usual in an effort to not be recognized by the crowd of commuting strangers. "Today is the day you all go home, isn't it? It was nice having you here, though I have to admit I would have liked to spend a bit more time with you all."

"I guess now that everyone's here, I'll break the news to you," Daemon announced. "James has offered me a position with one of the branches of his company, so I'll be staying here, close to these two."

Ah, shit. I'll actually miss those three, thought Gress.

"Please… please give Ross' family my condolences," said Daemon, withdrawing somewhat and failing to hide his grief.

It would be a long few months for Daemon. Gress assumed that Kyrett had given him the news on Ross' condition that morning. She almost wished that Ross and Daemon hadn't met, so Daemon wouldn't have started seeing her as a little sister, even knowing she could only last as long as a flower was in bloom.

No, I'm sure grief is worth the good moments they shared. Better than having not met. Much harder, though.

"Well, I guess now I have to share my news, too," Kyrett sighed. "I'm going to go back to my own time to visit my family for a while. I'll be back from time to time for a visit, but now that Betta is no longer a threat, I must go back for some time. It was nice meeting you all. I'm sure I'll be back before long."

"So," Gress said, lingering on the thought. "It's just Rerell and I, isn't it?"

"It seems so," Clerski said. "We're going back home on our own. How about we wait until the last run of the night so we can spend the day together?"

That was exactly what they did. Teki, James, and Daemon were the first to leave for their place again once the night hit. They said their goodbyes, and with the dead daisy Wilt pressed to dry in a book

Clerski gave him, Daemon led the newlyweds back to the black sports car. Gress found herself sad to see them leave. *This is their home, though. Maybe I'll visit them over the summer, or maybe they'll stop by my place during one of James' business trips.*

Shortly after they had disappeared from view, Kyrett announced that he had to be on his way. In an unceremoniously short flash of light, the air inside the station rippled and shimmered into the form of a portal. "If any of you need to contact me, call the number written down in the desk in my office. It connects right to here..." He tapped the metal ring around his neck. "And you can send a call to me at any time or place."

He gave an individual parting message to both Clerski and Gress, then he let the rippling portal consume him. It wasn't enough of a goodbye for either. For Kyrett it was a short trip. For Gress and Clerski, now stranded in the past with only each other from their time, it felt like a goodbye.

Right on time, the last train of the night rolled up.

"This is it," Clerski breathed. "It's over now, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Come on."

Gress and Clerski boarded the train, finding a nice spot that was lit by a few overhead lights. Gress thought that the seat that they had felt rather empty.

Teki should have been beside her, either asleep or trying to critique the decor, likely not giving it a good rating no matter how cozy it was.

Norris should have been gazing, as if lost, out the window, her hands shaking and the woman pausing to give a story or some tips about train etiquette.

Ross should have been curiously talking to nearby passengers, trusting Daemon to hold onto the flower Wilt for her.

Kyrett should have been, well, Gress didn't know how else to put it than Kyrett should have just been Kyrett, both unpredictable yet a calm presence in the group. She wanted to know that if anything were to go wrong, Kyrett would have been there to help. She wanted to know that Kyrett would just be there.

And for a moment, when she closed her eyes and imagined their voices, Gress could almost pretend that they were in the train with

Clerski, Marlon, and herself. In a way, they were. Norris rested in the bottle that Clerski refused to let go of, as nothing more than dust and fond memories. Kyrett had left his mark on the group in more ways than either of the women could count. Each of the others, whether they were building a new life far from the rural town, or if they had left one way or another, had given irreplaceable memories to Gress and Clerski.

And now they brought those memories home.

They returned to their small town late that night. The first place they went was the school, where they knew that a few staff members would be. They knew that, even if no one else was there, Claude would let them in because he practically lived in his art room.

"Huh? You guys are back now, hm?" Claude asked, blowing the single floppy blond lock out of his face and smoothing the rest. "Come on in. You both look tired. Mind if I sketch your exhausted posture for a minute?"

"Lay off," Gress muttered, pushing past Claude and hurrying Marlon indoors. "We just got back home and we left our car at the train station."

"Oh, sorry for being so upfront. Come on in. Matsuda's still here, he was trying to get in contact with you. I got a few good sketches of his concerned expressions."

A voice from the staff room called out. "Listen to Rendal and lay off, Claude." Gress knew that the voice was that of a tired Matsuda. "Bring Rendal and Clerski into the staff room. I'd like to hear about their trip."

"So would I," a teacher purred from her spot behind an old desk. It was Betta. It seemed that due to possessing Kyrett for so many years, she too was qualified to teach. Her wings were outstretched in a

display of her inhuman nature. Gress wondered how Matsuda and Claude took that when they first saw it.

"Rendal, Ms. Izoin here filled me in on everything that happened. It appears that the History teacher won't be returning?"

"He went back home," Gress said. She pulled the pin out of her pocket and gave it to the principal. The older man smiled and clipped it onto his gray suit jacket.

"Thank you, Rendal." He paused. "That's too bad about Kyrett. He was good to his students, and his students were probably too damn good to him. Some of them would swarm around both of us like they were flies, you know, so I'd hate to have my complaining partner gone and have to deal with them on my own." Matsuda chuckled again. "Well, I don't have the right to complain, I guess. It's not that bad, but I will miss him. I hope Kyrett is happy in whatever time in the future he comes from. Do you think he might visit?"

"I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't. I've seen him nearly every day since we met years ago."

"You know he'll be back," Ms. Izoin, now the new History teacher, sighed. She took out a cigarette and started to light it, but Matsuda snatched it from her and threw it at the wall on the other side of the staff room. "And don't worry about the swarms of students. Ever since I showed them my wings, they haven't left me alone. They're just curious."

Matsuda sighed, half with irritation and half in relief. "Clerski, Rendal, I can't drive you home tonight. I have too much correcting to do before exams. If you'd like to help me, here's the answer key for the multiple choice. I'll deal with the constructed response ones."

Gress didn't hear him. She had already fallen asleep on the desk after having a ridiculously long, strange week.

Clerski approached Gress the next morning. She woke Gress gently.

"Hey," she said. "Can you help me with something?"

Gress stirred and then woke, finding her head down on her desk over some test papers. It was how her week started, and it would be how it ended, too.

"Rerell… what is—"

"Daraegys. She found me last night."

"Oh shit. Sorry," said Gress. "What did I do?"

"No, it was a good thing. Did you know she brought some photo film back from that hotel?"

"I don't know anything I get up to when I'm her. There was that paper in my pocket, but she doesn't share anything else with me. *I* don't share— oh, it doesn't matter. What happened, Rerell?"

Clerski placed a stack of photos on Gress' desk. "She can transfer energies. We made these together. From my casting ability and her transfer, we made a few copies of moments where all of us were together."

Gress lifted herself fully upright and her face softened. It was possibly the gentlest Clerski had ever seen Gress look. She looked through moments of everyone together. The hotel lobby, the airport, and many individual moments through their journey all were preserved in film that had once comprised Daraegys' body.

"I mailed some out to Teki, Daemon, and James this morning. I figured you would want some, too."

"Rerell, this is—"

"I was going to send some to Kyrett too, but we don't need to now."

"Yeah, I suppose mailing to the future is just a time capsule."

"Actually…"

That last voice wasn't Clerski, as expected. It was Kyrett Arlot, walking in from the hallway as if on cue.

Gress bolted up and braced herself on the desk. "How—"

"It's time travel, Gress! I was gone for three months, but I traveled back to today. You didn't think I'd just ditch you here, did you? I can't let Betta have my job, and obviously I miss you two too much!"

Gress actually hugged Kyrett, ditching part of her standoffish nature to welcome her good friend back.

When the three had caught up (well, mostly Kyrett, since Clerski and Gress didn't have much to share) they went to Kyrett's office.

Rerell helped Kyrett find a picture frame in his desk drawer, and the two put a group photo into it and placed it on the desk prominently. Gress watched them, lingering behind and staring at her own copy of the photo.

She looked at it fondly, tucked it away, and went to join her companions.

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